



sing *Your* secrets

LOVE, ME & THE 303 SERIES

KAY COVE

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secrets

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*This one is for the girls whose first loves didn't last. Cheers to  
the fools who broke your heart and made you stronger,  
smarter, and **fierce**.*

*Life is a balance between holding on and letting go.*

— Rumi

# sing *Your* secrets playlist

*Differences* Ginuwine

*Bed* J. Holiday

*Successful* Drake, Trey Songz, Lil Wayne

*Slow* Sammie

*This Woman's Work* Maxwell

*Adore* Cashmere Cat, Ariana Grande

*In My Bed* Rotimi, Wale

*Loveeeeeee Song* Rihanna, Future

*Fall For Your Type* Jaimie Foxx, Drake

*True Colors* The Weeknd

*Good Morning Gorgeous* Mary J. Blige

*Southside* Lloyd, Ashanti

*Weight* SoMo

*Cater 2 U* Destiny's Child

*New Flame* Chris Brown, Usher, Rick Ross

*My Boo* Usher, Alicia Keys

*Upgrade U* Beyoncé, Jay-Z

*Make Me Better* Fabolous, Ne-Yo

**spoiler warning**

## author note in regards to series

It is not entirely necessary to read the previous books in this series as this is a standalone novel featuring a unique romance, however, for the best reading experience it is highly *recommended*. [Love, Me & the 303](#) is a series of interwoven standalone novels with plots that overlap during the same timeframe. For the best experience, read the series in order.

*Sing Your Secrets* is book four in the series and begins **during** the events of book three, [Owe Me One](#). There are character mentions and appearances from the prior books that may include spoilers.



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**one**

...

**I** t's 9:09 in the morning. Thank God.

I'm relieved when nine o'clock comes and goes and I'm not rushing to my front door to stop the relentless rapid knocking. Luxy Floral has a guaranteed delivery time of nine o'clock and most of the time that little delivery punk, who knocks like a woodpecker on speed, is early. The flowers are beautiful. The reminder of my ex-boyfriend, however, is a very unpleasant way to start my morning.

Somehow the word *boyfriend* seems like an understatement. It's not heavy enough to convey the magnitude of what we had...what we lost. Walking away and recovering from our breakup took strength I didn't think I had, years of tears, and countless pounds lost—and not in a revenge-body, make-him-jealous kind of way. For a while there, I looked sickly. Without my best friends, I wouldn't have made it through. Peter Mills, better known by his stage name—Petey—didn't just break my heart. He broke my spirit. I don't need a reminder of all that shit in the form of apology flowers before nine o'clock in the morning.

On this pleasant Thursday morning, I take my time getting ready. I wash my hair instead of going through my usual dry shampoo regimen. I put on my makeup carefully, and even play around with some of the fancy blush and highlighter samples my influencer friend Amani sent me from L.A. My paralegal paycheck is meager but I get a little taste of the finer things from my far more successful best friends. I pull out all the stops this morning, even opting to wear my most seductive

red-lace matching bra and panties under my modest legal office attire. I don't know why today feels so important. There's something in the air. Or maybe, I'm just going out of my way to prove I'm okay.

Petey resurfacing hasn't rattled me.

I'm still okay.

Better than okay. *Thriving*.

When I can delay no longer, I head to my front door without my travel mug, intent on treating myself to a ten-dollar latte from my favorite coffee shop downtown before work.

My tranquil morning is immediately upended when I open my front door and see a splotchy-faced, sweaty, delivery boy carrying a massive bouquet of red, pink, and white roses.

"*Oh, come on!*" I gripe. "Seriously?"

"Sorry...I'm...late..." he says between noisy pants.

Stepping aside, I let him pass me to place the giant bouquet of flowers on my kitchen table. It may seem odd to let a flower delivery boy into my apartment, but Harry is no stranger. We've been doing this for a full week now. The first bouquet, I kept. The second and third, I threw away. The following, I brought to work and surprised Rona, our office secretary. The pretty bouquet with the hibiscuses I dropped off to my friend Noa at the art gallery she works for, Annisen. The tropical flowers reminded me of her and I figured they'd look better on her desk than in my trashcan.

Then there was the bouquet filled with pink wildflowers which reminded me of my friend, Addie—or my preferred nickname for her, *Baby Bear*. She went through hell while she and her now fiancé were briefly broken up. She cried...*a lot*. Ugly cried. Hyperventilating, snot bubbles, the whole nine, but at least she really let herself feel it. She wrote a freaking book about it. She used her heartbreak to channel all her creativity into her breakout novel, *Pretend With Me*. It's an absolute masterpiece, and I'm convinced she and Joel got their happily ever after because she embraced her heartbreak.

Me? Not so much. I didn't write a story about the first time I fell in love and had my heart ripped out. I didn't embrace jack shit. Even after I left Atlanta, I let him string me on for years long-distance. I had to cut him out completely—I blocked his numbers and socials; I don't even let Spotify or Pandora play his music.

The only way to truly move on was to emancipate my entire identity. No more Petey. No more music. No more tours, shows, or falling asleep in the studio. It all had to stop...

Cold turkey.

Petey was a drug. Music was an addiction. *I had to stop.*

I don't have the strength to turn around and reminisce about the past. So, I took Petey's stupid apology flowers, wrote a new card, and used them as a way to tell Addie she's the most amazing, badass, Baby Bear friend I've ever had.

I couldn't save a bouquet for Amani or Quinn, the other two of my friends who round out our tight-knit sisterhood. Amani is too far away, still stuck in L.A. for a few more weeks. Quinn would have serious questions about why I'm waltzing around with luxury floral bouquets, and I have a hard time lying to her. If I tell her what Petey's been up to, she might actually commit a felony to rip him apart, and now that Dad's out, I'm over jail visits. I'm not going back, so better not to provoke the mama bear of our group.

"Harry," I ask, staring at the boy with chocolate-colored curls and scant freckles. "What happens if I refuse these?"

He looks startled as he holds out the pen and delivery slip for my signature. "Uh... I actually don't know... I guess I bring them back to the shop?"

I squint one eye. "Would you get in trouble?"

"Uh..."

His forehead wrinkles as he grimaces, so I stop with the questions, take the damn pen, and sign. I snatch the note addressed to "Reese" with a little heart out of the cardholder and toss it in the trash. I don't need any temptation.

Raising my eyebrows, I ask, “Do you have a girlfriend?”

He immediately looks bashful and rubs the side of his arm. “Um, not really... I’m single.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he thinks I’m suggesting. “Oh, *stop*. What are you—sixteen?”

“Eighteen,” he says too eagerly, his eyes filling with hope.

I cross my arms and let my eyes hit the ceiling. It’s annoying when grown men look at me like I’m on the menu, let alone eighteen-year-olds. I snap at him when I catch his eyes lingering on my chest.

“Harry, my eyes are up here, mmkay? What I meant was, why don’t you take these flowers to the girl you like? My treat. Write a new note and surprise her with these.” *Whatever it takes to get these out of my apartment.*

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” he says with his eyes widening. “This is like a three-hundred-dollar bouquet.” To an eighteen-year-old, I’m sure it’s a disgusting amount of money to spend on flowers. What he doesn’t realize is that Petey’s last tour grossed over sixty million dollars. He could wipe his ass with hundred-dollar bills without a care in the world which is why these fancy bouquets don’t mean a damn thing to me. A man simply throwing money at a mess he made fixes absolutely nothing. My love is free... So, stop trying to buy it. I loved him well before he was worth anything. I didn’t want his wallet, just his heart.

And I came up short.

“I insist. It’s either your girl or my trash can—where are these flowers going to call home?”

His eyes shuffle left, right, to his shoes and then back to me. Finally, he agrees. “Okay, but tomorrow’s you’ll keep, right? Junie has a really special bouquet planned. It’s blue and it has feathers in it.”

*Christ.* “How many more?” My eyes narrow to slits.

“You’re on the morning schedule for at least another two weeks.”

I give him a deadpan stare. Blinking at Harry with the most stoic face I can muster, I try to say *fuck no* without actually saying it.

“All right, Harry,” I say, fishing out a one-hundred-dollar bill out of my wallet and handing it to him.

“Oh, I was pre-tipped, ma’am.”

“Mhmm, this isn’t your tip. I’m going to try and put a stop to this, but in the meantime, this is payment for you to forge my signature and take the remaining bouquets to any apartment in the city of Denver except this one. Got it?”

He looks at me with furrowed brows and wide eyes but still nods. “Okay?”

I rustle his hair, patronizingly. “There you go, scamp. Now get out of here, you.” Harry rolls his eyes at my sarcastic tone. “And seriously,” I say, my voice returning to its normal even tenor, “don’t bring me any more flowers, Harry.”

“What’s wrong with flowers, I thought... Well, never mind.”

“It’s okay. What?” My hand finds my hip and I already know what he’s about to ask.

“Well, if I sent a girl flowers every day, especially really nice flowers, that’d mean I really liked her—loved her, even. It’d suck if she was giving them away and throwing them away.”

I cross my arms and look Harry up and down. He’s a handsome boy. I’m sure he’ll go to college this coming fall and have all the girls lining up for...*flowers*, so I feel like I need to impart some wisdom on someone who has been there and done that.

“When you find a girl you want to give flowers to, make sure it’s to say I like you, or *I love you*. Try not to be the guy who uses flowers to say, I’m sorry I dumped you, humiliated you, lied to you until you believed all the gaslighting, and then *used* you to climb my way to the top while starving you of any credit.”



“Oh,” Harry says, looking at his shoes while his cheeks flush. “I didn’t realize.”

“How would you know? On the outside, it looks like a really romantic gesture, right?” Bashfully, he nods, and I wink in response. “All right, kid. Out you go. Take your flowers.”

When the door closes shut behind him, I whip out my phone and head to blocked contacts. My stomach swoops like I’m at the top of a roller coaster as the hot nerves rush through my veins.

After all this time, I still get nervous. But not because of Petey, and not because I want him back—it’s just hard to face the person I was with him. She was desperate, scared, and paranoid. I hate reliving the past. I hate thinking about how long it took for me to finally stand up for myself. I hate that even though I did all the right things—I moved on, I stopped talking to him, I leaned on my friends. I still wanted to run back to him every step of the way. I’ve never felt weaker in my life. The term *first* love is deceptive. It implies there’s a second, a third...

Love doesn’t work like that. Not true love. The memories go fuzzy, but they never go away. The scars fade, but they don’t ever completely heal. Your first love lasts forever. It marks you. It changes you.

Sometimes for the worse.

It took a lot of effort and work on my part to put the past in the past. It took a lot of dates, hookups, and extremely short-lived relationships before I got used to the idea of moving on. I was just trying to put as many bodies as possible between me and Petey until I was comfortable with the lingering ache of losing what I thought would be my forever.

For a while, I was hopeful. Convincing myself time healed all wounds, I kept dating and fucking, trying to fall in love again in the same passionate, desperate way I did the first time. But it’s been three years since we officially parted ways, and nothing comes close. *No one* comes close to making me feel the way he did—the good and the bad.

**Me:** Petey, stop. No more flowers. Please just let me go.

The minute my message is delivered, I see his response bubble populate. Petey's good with words. He's made a fortune manipulating them into rhymes. I can't afford to give him the time of day and get sucked back in.

I block his number again before he has a chance to reply.

**two**

...

“Miles, what the fresh hell is this?” Sienna, my cousin, and current savior, enters the kitchen, scowling at the breakfast I prepared. I set down the plate of scrambled eggs to join the bacon, pancakes, and waffles I set out on her kitchen island. I even carved a cantaloupe...poorly. But it’s the thought that counts.

“I could ask the same.” I look her up and down, studying the heinous brown cotton robe she’s wearing that is about three times thicker than a robe should be. “What are you wearing?”

She exhales in exasperation as she slides onto a stool next to the island. “Now that we’re roommates, you should know this is my period robe.”

I blink at her.

“As in I’m on my period.”

“I got it, Sienna,” I grumble.

“It’s a monthly occurrence.” Her smile twists cruelly as she watches me shift uncomfortably.

“How about moving forward, we share less?”

I grab a few serving spoons from the drawer farthest to the left. I learned this morning Sienna’s kitchen has four different silverware drawers. Everyday dining. Fancy. Serving cutlery. And one drawer filled with spoons and forks that look like solid gold. That one drawer could probably pay off my enormous credit card debt, my debt to my parents, and might

even fund another failed demo. Unlike me, chasing dreams, Sienna was smart. She stayed in-state to finish college and married a disgustingly rich finance guy for *love*. He's twelve years her senior, and I'll admit, the entire family speculated, but they've been together for four years and they are still madly in love.

"You hungry?" I needlessly ask as I stuff the serving spoon into the heap of scrambled eggs. Sienna is already filling a plate I set out for her.

"As I said," she mumbles through a mouthful, "*period*. Yes, I'm hungry. But"—she points the tip of her fork at me—"what I meant was, I don't like you walking on eggshells. You don't have to do all this just because you're staying here."

"What smells so good?" Lawrence asks as he joins us in the kitchen. He's dressed for work, ready to head out the door but pulls his suit jacket off when he sees breakfast laid out buffet style.

"Good morning," Sienna says as her husband kisses the top of her head. "Will you please tell Miles he doesn't need to cook for us?"

He taps her nose, gently, exuding so much affection in just a small touch. "Miles, you don't have to cook. But it'd be great if you could teach Sienna how to cook."

She rolls her eyes. "I heat up stuff."

Law widens his eyes at me and shakes his head behind Sienna's. "But please, make yourself at home. You're not a guest. You're family."

"That's what I said! He slept on the couch last night. *The couch*. We have three empty guest rooms and he bunked on the couch. *No pillow*."

"I got in late," I protest. "I didn't want to bother anyone upstairs."

I called Sienna when my demo flopped...again. The record labels that responded to me told me it just *wasn't for them right now*—which is the cookie-cutter response for *we don't think we can monetize you*. More specifically, I don't have

enough of a social following. I need more listeners. My platform is pretty much nonexistent.

Hell, I thought that's what a record label was supposed to do—get you exposure and sell your music. If I had to record the damn songs, perform them, and find my own listeners, what are labels for besides hogging the royalties?

I love music. I *love* singing. I know I have a damn good voice. But no matter how hard I work, this industry keeps taking and taking and gives nothing back.

I either love or hate myself for thinking I was different. I'm not sure at this point if I'm chasing dreams or creating my worst nightmare.

I bet the rest of the wannabe successful musicians were smart enough not to quit their day jobs. Or, to get a day job in the first place. I poured every ounce I had into this vision and what I got in return was an eviction notice from my L.A. apartment and creditors starting to call.

My last live performance in L.A. was for a piss-drunk bachelorette party that only requested Justin Bieber covers. They didn't want to hear my songs. The grand finale was the bride-to-be pulling out her faker-than-Barbie's tits right before puking on me. That was the night I realized I was failing. It was time to tuck my tail between my legs, move back home, and accept help.

I am damn lucky my trophy wife of a cousin and her merciful husband had pity for me and took me in. What's more, they offered me a temporary job to recover some cash. In perfect timing, Law made an impulse commercial real estate investment. He purchased The Garage, which up until five years ago was the most revered music venue in downtown Denver. Today it's basically a pile of rubble. The building has hosted no one outside of the occasional squatter for years.

Luckily for Law, I worked construction through high school and until I dropped out of college to move to L.A. and become an R&B star. I'm still waiting on that last part to pan out, but my construction skills remain solid.

“Law, do you have the keys to The Garage? I want to go poke around and get some measurements for the renovation.”

His chewing slows and he glances at Sienna. “Didn’t you just get in last night?”

“Yes,” I say.

I’m eager to get started. I haven’t been to The Garage in nearly seven years and it was in rough shape then. Despite its name, the old venue is much larger than a regular garage, and I have a hell of a lot of manual labor ahead of me.

“Maybe relax for a day or two?” He furrows his salt and pepper brows at me. “I’m not on a timeline. And I still need to schedule an inspection before we start doing anything in there.”

Brushing my hands off on my pants, I grab a piece of bacon—my preferred hangover cure. Not that I drank last night, but the long-ass drive was far more taxing than a night of partying.

“Do you have anyone in mind? I can call to schedule or look up some inspectors.”

“I suppose that’d be helpful...” Law stares at me with wary eyes as he pops a chunk of cantaloupe in his mouth. Finally, he rises and fetches a set of keys from the desk drawer in the adjoining living room. He sets them on the kitchen island before sliding them my way and returning to his plate.

“I bought it blind. It’s a prime location downtown and the lot was a steal. But from what I understand, it’s been abandoned for a couple of years now. It’s probably in bad condition. No doubt it needs to be gutted. I’m not even sure what I’m going to market it as. Maybe a restaurant or a potential new location for a franchise business.”

“Franchise business?” I ask.

“Sure,” Law says, “like a Starbucks.”

“Ooh, I love Starbucks,” Sienna says clapping her hands together. “Maybe we should keep it. We could open a

Starbucks that serves holiday drinks year-round. Pumpkin spice lattes in March. We'll be rebels."

"I think that's against franchise rules, honey."

"Are you serious?" I can't help my voice cracking. Law and Sienna both look at me wide-eyed. "Guys, there are enough Starbucks in the world. The Garage used to sell out every single show. They couldn't keep the bar stocked. You should sell it as a music venue. Whoever buys it could make a small fortune if they restored it to its former glory."

"In this economy, I don't think there's going to be a lot of people lining up to drop millions on a music venue, Miles. I have to keep the property versatile to get a return on my investment."

"It's not just a *venue*," I explain. "The Garage has history in this city." One of my many jobs was in a club in L.A. Sure, there were live performances, but nothing's ever come close to the energy at The Garage. I used to be a frequent ticket holder growing up in Denver. Some of my favorite performances were there—Rumi Marshall, Petey, and Le Bonet all performed at The Garage before they blew up and topped the charts. It's like the place was a lucky charm.

*Maybe I should've tried to perform there when I had the chance...*

"I can do the reno work to make it the best music venue in a thirty-mile radius, I promise. Please. Let's just give it a chance and see if anyone bites. And if not, I'll transform it into whatever you need it to be."

The renovation shouldn't be problematic as long as there aren't major foundational, plumbing, or electrical issues. My dad and brothers own a commercial construction business. Dad says the proudest moment of his life is when he and my brothers officially went into business together. I was supposed to be the fourth signature on that business agreement, but I couldn't do it. Lorren Family Construction was not my dream. I tolerated laying floors and putting up sheetrock during my high school and college summers, simply to save up enough



money to get out of Denver. Dad still has two sons he's extremely proud of.

Two out of three ain't bad.

A low grumble of debate bubbles in Law's throat. "Miles, I'll keep an open mind. But promise me you won't go overboard and work yourself to death as some sort of penance. You don't owe us anything. And you are welcome to stay as long as you like."

*But I do. Law has agreed to pay me way more than I'm worth for this redo.* "I won't be in your hair for long. I am grateful for the job, guys. I'm not going to sit around and be a mooch." I grab the keys off the counter and dangle them in the air. "I'll make sure your investment doesn't go to waste."

"All right, if you're that confident." Law checks his watch and widens his eyes. "Shit, I have to run. My morning meeting is with the Wicked Witch of the West."

"The heiress to that real estate empire that's a spoiled bitch?"

Law raises one brow. "Isn't the saying spoiled *brat*?"

"I said what I said." Sienna stuffs another bite of syrupy waffle in her mouth.

"Well, yes that's the one," he says, then kisses her cheek. He nuzzles into her neck and mumbles way too loud, "How about tonight I pick up dinner from that Chinese restaurant you love, grab your favorite wine, we can light a few candles \_\_\_"

He stops mid-sentence, eyeing Sienna up and down as he registers what she's wearing. "Dammit. The period robe."

"Sorry." She scrunches her nose at him.

"Don't be. Love you, honey. Have a good day, guys." After draping his suit jacket over his arm, Law disappears from the kitchen. Sienna immediately takes off her robe revealing her SpongeBob pajama set. She could afford Vera Wang pajamas and yet she has a goofy yellow sponge on her shirt.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“As long as it’s not about your—”

“He wants a baby.”

“That’s great. You’ve always wanted kids, right?” I tilt my head not understanding her solemn expression. Isn’t that what married couples do? Love, marriage, babies.

“I just don’t think I’m ready.”

“Tell him that.” I grab a cube of cantaloupe and take a juicy bite. “You’re twenty-five. You’re old enough to have a baby, but young enough to not be ready. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“He’s thirty-seven. Even if we got pregnant right away, he’d still be nearing sixty when his kid graduates from high school. How is it fair to make him wait?”

“Is it fair to rush yourself?”

“I feel like being a mom will be a lot and I never really had a chance to chase my dreams.”

I blink at her with mock enthusiasm. “And what kind of dreams does an art history major have?”

“Hey!” she exclaims. Pointing her finger at me she continues. “Art collection is a serious business. But that’s not even what I’m talking about. I wanted to travel. I at least wanted to see the Louvre and Van Gogh museums before children, but Law works so much. He makes all this money, and we can’t actually do anything with it except invest in random things. My greatest accomplishment of the past three years is finally decorating this house.”

“Your house is massive. That’s a big accomplishment.”

She shakes her head in annoyance at my dismissiveness. “My point is, at least you were brave enough to step out of the box. I’m all tangled up in my safety net.”

I lean against the counter and level a stare at Sienna. “You picked love. Love is *not* a safety net. And I’m glad you didn’t

end up like me. College dropout and wannabe singer is not exactly attractive on a resume.”

She narrows her eyes. “Speaking of love...”

“What?”

Her eyes pop open in response as her brows raise so high, they may fly off her forehead. Her blue eyes look crazed, but she doesn’t elaborate.

“What?” I ask again.

“I’m going to come right out and say it—no slutty, shallow groupies are welcome in my home.” Sienna huffs. “Sorry.”

“*Groupies?* Do you think I’m someone else?”

“I know the kind of company you keep.”

I snort, evading a direct omission. I was bartending at a club in L.A. for almost sixty hours a week. What kind of girls did Sienna expect me to meet? “Your home is safe. You know what groupies don’t like?” I ask as Sienna tilts her head to the side. “Broke guys.”

“Well, now I feel like an ass.” She taps the kitchen island between us making a muffled thud, thud. “Miles, you’re too hard on yourself. We’re just in tough times.”

I look around her fancy-ass kitchen. “Yeah...*tough times.*”

“Tough times to *have* what you want and *be* what you want. Do you think Law wanted to go into wealth management? He wanted to be a math teacher and work with kids. But he also wanted to buy his future wife a house like this one someday. I’m just saying”—she grabs the syrup—“you’re trying to have both. It’s brave.”

“Or stupid,” I emphasize. I watch her bright eyes, which are almost covered by her long dark bangs, pool with concern. “I need something to change, Sienna. I can’t keep going like this. All I’ve heard for years now is ‘no.’ I don’t have one friend who isn’t fair-weather. The women I meet are gold-diggers and they’re shallow. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong, but I need to get my shit straight before I head back to L.A.”

“Why head back?” She uses her fork to cut her waffles into neat squares, the way you’d prepare a plate for a child. “You know what I think?” She takes a big bite and then says through a mouthful, “L.A. is the problem.”

“L.A. is the land of opportunity. If you’re going to be somebody or meet somebody major—it’s there.”

“When you used to sing in Denver you were happy. You sang like you loved to do it. Ever since this *MiLo* character showed up—”

“*Hey, easy now.* I was advised to choose a performer name \_\_\_”

“You were advised to do a lot of stuff. None of which is making you happy. Stay here. Sing *here* in Denver. Be with family and your real friends. Just be Miles. He’s a good guy. Eventually, it always works out for good guys.”

I give her a half-baked smile. I think reality hits harder for good guys. When you go into the game humble and hard-working it’s a little surprising when you find out the industry isn’t fair. Making it is just luck and lotteries. Clearly, the odds are against me.

“You know what *I* think?”

“What?” she asks through a mouthful.

“You should tell Law you’re not ready to have a baby.”

“I’ll talk to him when I figure out what I want. In the meantime,” she says as she pats the robe resting on the back of her chair, “I’ve got my tactics.”

*Didn’t need to know that.* “Okay, well, I am ready to be useful. I’m going to check out the building and make some calls but first, I really need a shower.” I glance over the kitchen island to the foyer, where the grand staircase leads upstairs to two extra guest bedrooms that Law and Sienna definitely don’t use. “Which bathroom can I borrow?”

“I’m seriously going to stab you with a fork before this is all over. Borrow? Stop being weird, Miles. This is your home as long as you need it to be. I made up the entire basement for

you so you can have some privacy. It's fourteen hundred square feet down there, one bedroom, a private bathroom, a powder room, and a pretty generous living room. It's much nicer than that rat hole you called an apartment in L.A."

"I *told* you to get a hotel when you came to visit—"

She holds up her hand. "Regardless, as long as none of your parade of skanks crosses the threshold of my home—*mi casa es su casa*."

"Roger that," I say, saluting her. "And Sienna?"

"Yes?"

"Jokes aside, thank you. I am not great at asking for help and I know my inability to express my need for help is why you insisted. I appreciate it more than you know."

She winks. "The male ego is a fragile thing."

"Yeah, yeah," I say sliding the keys off the counter and heading to the basement. It's the same setup I had in my parent's home when I was nineteen. The baby of the family, I had the basement to myself when my brothers left for college. Had I run to my parents after my money ran out in L.A., they would've offered me my old setup, I'm sure. But I chose Sienna because it's slightly less emasculating to run home to my cousin instead of my parents at my age. But there's no escaping the painfully embarrassing reality. No matter how I look at it, no matter where I'm sleeping, it's been five years since I left Denver to become a big deal.

And here I am...

Right back where I started.

**three**

...

**O**n Friday morning, I watch Rona, our office secretary, tend to the giant bouquet of Petey's flowers I brought in for her almost two weeks ago now.

"Aren't those on their last leg?"

"Not even close." She tuts distractedly as she pulls away the dying petals and fluffs the fat rose heads. "These are the most beautiful flowers anyone has ever given me. I'm riding this wave to the end. Thank you again, dear."

*Damn.* Now I feel guilty. I should've had all of Petey's bouquets delivered to Rona if I knew they would've made her this happy. I have no clue where Harry has been dropping them off, or if Petey stopped the deliveries after my text. All I know is it's been over a week since I've started my morning with his goofy self at my front door. Mission accomplished.

"You're welcome, Rona. Hey, is Eli still in? Or did he take lunch?" I nod down the hallway of attorney offices. Us lowly paralegals all reside on the opposite side of the offices.

"He's got a meeting in thirty. He's still here," she mumbles. She returns her attention to the flowers as she shifts stems and leaves around trying to bring her dying roses back to life.

I strut down the hallway like I'm on a mission, but I hesitate outside of Eli Walsh's office door. Documents in one hand, my other hand raised to knock, I take a deep breath, preparing myself. Our last encounter was...*uncomfortable*.

Eli and I had been hooking up off and on for more than a year. It'd come in spurts. Sometimes I'd simply be his paralegal, and he, my acting supervisor. When he was single, we'd go at it like rabbits in his office. It wasn't all sex, we'd hang out and watch movies too. He'd pour me wine and rub my feet. I'd give him superb head... *Okay, fine. It was mostly sex.*

Eli was fine. I *like* him. I'm just nowhere in the ballpark of *loving* him. We were friends. We were kind to one another and comforted each other. There was no pressure, no titles, and no expectations. I really thought we were on the same page.

Until last week when he asked me to be his girlfriend.

*Knock, knock.*

I brush my knuckles on his door so lightly, it's like I'm hoping he doesn't hear me.

"Come in," he bellows.

*Here we go.* Opening the door, I poke my head in, expecting to be met with daggers, instead, he gives me his familiar warm sweet smile. *Fuck, that's worse.* How come I can't just love a guy like Eli Walsh—faithful, do-gooder attorney at law? He's handsome. Eli's dark hair is always neatly cut. His high cheekbones, bright blue eyes, and clean-shaven face make him look like he's in his early twenties, even at age thirty. He's charming, well-spoken, and highly educated. My mom couldn't have drawn up a better match for me in her mind.

He's good for me.

*But the spark, the ache, the desperation...* It's just not there.

"Hey, you got a minute?"

"For you, of course." He rolls away from his computer monitor, giving me his full attention. If we were still hooking up, I'd lock this door, slide onto his desk, and hike my skirt up a bit while our knees bumped together. But today, I opt for the chair on the other side of his desk after handing Eli the paperwork I've prepared.



“I wanted to make sure I got these documents right. I have a friend who needs a fast annulment. I’ve prepared enough divorce paperwork for Henley I can do it in my sleep, but annulments have been few and far between.”

Henley & Associates is one of the most sought-after divorce law firms in Denver. Most of our clients make well into the seven figures and we are particularly ruthless when it comes to the stay-at-home spouse. Henley, especially, has made it his personal plight to ensure that stay-at-home moms and wives who have dedicated their entire lives to supporting professional athletes, big-name CEOs, and successful business owners, are compensated fairly amidst their divorces—aka make out like bandits. He’s basically the Robin Hood of the celebrity divorce world, who likes to target rich cheating bastards.

Henley’s terrifying when he wants to be. I’ve watched him in a courtroom once make a cocky-ass, richer-than-God NBA player bawl like a baby over his adulterous ways. His ex-wife got more than half his fortune, *and* a heartfelt apology that day.

As a paralegal, I get to stay mostly behind the scenes. I’m buried in paperwork daily, so I get to pop in my headphones while I prepare court documents and pretend like I’m anywhere but here. As noble as I consider Henley and his team to be, I’d resign if I had any idea what I wanted to do with my life. All I know at this point is I’d like to stay in my mom’s good graces. Henley is very particular about his employees, even his paralegals. Mom had to call in a favor to get me this job.

Eli clicks his tongue as he flips through the pages. “Vegas wedding?”

“Yes, but it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“There wasn’t alcohol involved?”

I’ve known Quinn’s organized, calculating, mission-oriented ass for seven years. The fact she got married on a whim in Las Vegas most definitely involved alcohol in some facet or another. But based on her text message, she and retired

NFL superstar Cody Kartlin were most definitely sober when they exchanged vows.

“From what I gather, she just needed the paperwork.”

Eli squints at me, his expression full of questions, but he doesn't press. “Annulments are complicated if they were both sober and of sound mind.”

“What about fraud? Quinn is an heiress. She's going to inherit a huge chunk of cash. Can we just say her new husband was—”

“Wait,” Eli interrupts, re-scouring the first page of the paperwork I prepared. “Quinn *Sabin*? As in Sabin Technologies?”

“Yes.”

“She's a friend?”

I cross my legs and settle into the back of my chair. “One of my best friends.” I gesture up and down to the designer jumpsuit I'm wearing. “This is actually stolen from her closet.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “*Borrowed*. Borrowed from her closet.”

“Wow,” Eli mumbles. “All this time...how little I still know about you.”

If Eli is surprised I'm friends with the heiress to the Banks-Sabin fortune, I wonder how he'd react if he knew another one of my friends is a bestselling author, and another one is engaged to Hollywood star Chase Ford and is godmother to his daughter from another woman. Our little gang would be a fantastic telenovela. All we'd need is to throw in the fact my ex-boyfriend is one of the highest-grossing rappers of this decade. Except that story is less gratifying because there's no happy ending. The minute Petey found his claim to fame, he dumped me—hard. Loyalty, trust, and love were all boring compared to the limelight. It wasn't enough anymore for Petey to *look* single. He wanted to *be* single.

He wanted every woman except the one he had.

At least until recently.

“Make sense?” Eli asks, pulling me back from my trailing thoughts.

“Sorry.” I widen my eyes and blink like I’m trying to focus. “What’s that?”

“I said fraud is a long shot. Unless your friend is lying about her inheritance, and her new spouse only married her for the money.”

I snort. *If only*. Cody’s infatuation with Quinn is crystal clear and it has nothing to do with money. “Not accurate.”

“Then, I’d recommend a divorce.” Eli hands the papers back over. “Or have them really rethink the wedding day and maybe *remember* that they’d been drinking.” He winks.

Gasping, I pretend to clutch the nonexistent pearls around my neck. “My word, Eli. Are you suggesting my friends *manipulate* the law to work in their favor?” Tsking my tongue, I shake my head at him. “Naughty.”

It’s a poor word choice. *Naughty*. We’ve used that word once or twice in the bedroom...and this very office. His eyes linger on my lips briefly before he runs his hand down his face, breaking his gaze. I could let this awkward tension between us go on, or I could walk right up to the elephant in the room and tell it to fuck off.

“Are we okay?”

“Of course, why?” He tries to smile, but his lips barely twitch.

I let out an exaggerated breath. “Because last week you asked me to be your girlfriend, and I said no.”

Eli shrugs. “It’s okay, Reese. I asked a question, and you gave me an answer. Am I supposed to be mad at you?”

“I’d understand if you were.”

“I’m not going to punish you for being honest.”

*Dammit*. That just makes me wish I wanted him in the way he wants me even more.

“May I explain?”

Rubbing his jaw slowly, he looks uncomfortable. “You don’t owe me any apologies—”

“I’m not apologizing,” I say, maybe a little too emphatically. “I just want to *explain* myself. I know you’ll say I don’t owe you an explanation, but I do. You’re wonderful in every single way, Eli. You’re kind, smart, and so attractive. And I really like you...but...”

I trail off as I wait for his permission to continue. Eventually, he rotates his wrist implying I should go on. “Well please don’t stop the praise there. I’m also about to make partner,” he says with a chuckle. His joke is only charming because he’s so damn humble.

“You know my mom got me this job. Henley would’ve never hired an inexperienced paralegal right out of their undergrad, but my mom and Henley went to law school together. They go way back.”

Eli nods slowly, obviously confused with what the hell my mom has to do with me not wanting to officially date him, but he’s polite, so he lets me continue.

“I was supposed to stay in-state for college. I got an academic scholarship, but I gave it up... to chase a boy.”

“Ah. Where to?”

“Atlanta.” Where I could drown myself in R&B, hip-hop, the beautiful culmination of the two, and of course, all things Petey. “I told my mom I was pursuing a bachelor of science in music, but really, I was just there dicking around. It pissed my mom off to no end. We had a huge falling out.” I was making love and singing day in, and day out, thinking I’d found nirvana. I was Petey’s sounding board. His heart. His muse. I never planned on coming home.

“How did it work out with your guy?”

I shake my head. “You know how first loves go.” I flash him a small smile. “I dropped out and came home in the middle of my sophomore year. I had to beg my mom to take me back in. She helped me transfer to a reputable school in Denver and had me pick a degree that would set me up for law

school. My mom even paid for my apartment. I mean, it was peanuts. I lived with Quinn,” I say holding up the annulment paperwork, “and a few more of my closest friends.”

Eli bobs his head. “That was nice of her.”

“Sort of. The condition was she’d help me get my life sorted out, and I was to leave everything about Atlanta behind. My ex. Chasing a career in music. All of it.”

Crossing his arms, Eli settles back into his office chair as his brows cinch in confusion. “That seems a little controlling, doesn’t it?”

“She’s a corporate lawyer, what do you expect?” I widen my eyes at him and he responds with half a chuckle. “In all honesty, I think it was a chip on her shoulder. She’s still bitter about my dad and his time in the industry. He was a record producer. A damn good one too. He’s credited on two Grammy wins.”

“Really?” He raises his eyebrows. “Anything I’ve heard?”

I know for a fact Eli is a Nickelback and Imagine Dragons lover. “I doubt it.” I genuinely love all genres. My dad has more singular tastes in music. Hip hop. R&B. Soulful. Sinful. And occasionally foul words and club beats.

“So, when did your parents get divorced?”

I shake my head so hard that my long curls whip me across the face. “They didn’t. They never married. My dad was in love with music. My mom was just his mistress. I think she was terrified I was headed down the same path. And if the jealousy wasn’t enough, my dad just got out of prison a month ago...DUI.”

Eli crinkles his forehead. “Prison for a DUI?”

“It was his third. He drove right into a parked car, downtown. Pretty much totaled it. Guess who’s car?”

“Whose?”

“The freaking assistant district attorney’s car.”

Eli blows out a pained breath. “Yikes.”

“Yeah.” I cringe as I exhale. I hate describing my dad this way. He made his bed, but there’s so much brilliance in Dad outside of his reckless, emotionally bad decisions. “Not a proud moment for us. Which is why my mom wanted me to follow in her footsteps, not my dad’s.”

“Doesn’t sound like such a bad thing.”

I lock onto Eli’s light eyes. “I took the LSATs my junior year of college, hungover I might add. I told my mom I got a 158.”

“That’s not a bad score,” he says, cocking his head to the side, empathetically. “It took me two tries to break 160.”

“I lied, Eli.”

“*Oh*. Lower?”

“I scored a 174.”

“*Damn*.” His jaw actually drops. “You’d easily get into Yale or Harvard with that score.”

“Stanford,” I clarify. “I applied just for shits and giggles. I declined my early admittance and I never told my mom. It would’ve sealed my fate.”

He closes his eyes and nods again, finally understanding my long-winded story. “You’re smart, and have a knack for law, but you—”

“Hate it,” I finish for him. “Wait, that’s dramatic. I don’t *hate it*, it just isn’t what I want to do with my life. That’s why I shouldn’t be dating anyone right now. I think the version of me that you like,” I gesture up and down to my business romper and short heels, “won’t last forever. And it sounds like you’re looking for something long-term.”

Eli opens his mouth to say something but the *knock, knock, knock* at his door interrupts him.

“Yes?” he enunciates.

“Your twelve-thirty is in the waiting room,” Rona announces through the door.

“Be right there,” Eli calls out before turning his gaze to me. “I hate to cut this short, but... Friends?” he asks softly, extending his hand over his desk. I rise, eager to accept the peace offering even though there was never really a war.

“Absolutely. But probably just platonic friends from now on.”

He snorts. “I was worried you’d say that. But it’s best. You’re already gorgeous and funny, but now that I know how smart you are too...if we’re not careful I might start doodling Mr. Reese Reyes on all my diaries. We wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

I burst into awkward laughter. “No, we wouldn’t. But, hey I’m going to go grab lunch. Seeing as you’re tied up in a meeting, can I at least bring you back something?”

“If you’re offering,” he says rising, his eyes lighting up. “How about Out West?”

“Ugh,” I groan. “*Again?*”

“Come on,” he pleads adorably. “You shot me down hard, the least you can do is grab me a French dip, with the homemade kettle chips, and spicy—”

“Ketchup. Yeah, yeah, I know your order. *Fine.*” I hold up one finger at him as I rise from my chair as well. “But you can only use that guilt request once.”

“Fair enough. Out West’s kettle chips are worth the early cash in,” he says through a laugh. I see myself out of his office with Quinn’s annulment paperwork in my hands. I’m not looking forward to telling her that her master plan of marrying Cody to get out of a work relocation just got a whole lot more complicated. But at the very least, *this* elephant is addressed.

Eli and I are still friends.

Petey’s flowers have stopped.

All in all, in the department of men, for once, I’m completely drama free.

**four**

...



“You guys are lucky,” the inspector says. He takes in a panoramic view of The Garage and clicks his jaw. “Most of your damage is cosmetic.” He pats the wall beside him. “She’s in great shape. I’m not supposed to say this until I write up an official report, but a little cleaning, some paint, and she’ll be ready to go.”

That might be an exaggeration. There is most definitely a family of rats using the standing water in the toilets as a disgusting spa resort. But as far as the big issues—structural, mold, foundation—it seems like things are in our favor. It’s apparent the inspector was expecting a lot more work. He’s in full coveralls and has a hard hat tucked under his right arm. The notes he scribbled on his clipboard barely take up half a page. All Law and I see are checkmarks in the row of boxes marked good condition.

“I did not see that coming.” Law lets out a low whistle. The floor of The Garage is a mess and his shiny dress shoes are dusty from the grime of the filthy concrete floor. “I thought we’d be looking at a year of work, at least.”

The inspector shrugs. “I guess it depends on how slow you paint,” he says with a raspy chuckle—the kind you get when you smoke a pack a day. “I would get started on that liquor license though. Without a decent bar, a venue like this won’t turn much of a profit. I’ve got a buddy on the liquor license board and I know for a fact they are backed up with applications right now.”

“Oh, we’re just renovating it. A liquor license is the actual owner’s problem. Hell, they may not need it. This could become a bookstore or a clothing shop for all we know,” Law says, nodding. He extends his hand and the inspector, whose name I can’t remember, takes it eagerly. “I appreciate it. I was worried I bought a flop.”

“No, sir. In fact, we wrapped this up so quickly if you don’t need anything further from me, I might be able to squeeze in a lunch hour today.” He extends his hand to me as well, having the courtesy to include me in the conversation. I’m really just here to watch and take notes on whatever Law needs me to fix up.

“It’s still a big job.” Law walks the left perimeter of the venue. With his foot, he nudges a crusty looking box that’s filled with cords and what looks like pieces of an old amp. “Even if it’s cosmetic, it’s a lot of work. The bathrooms still have to be stripped and redone. We have to decide if the kitchen should be remodeled or gutted. Hmm, a quality kitchen keeps this an option for restaurant buyers...that could be lucrative. In fact, maybe we expand the back space to leave room for a full-service kitchen?”

Sitting on the edge of the grimy stage, I swing my legs over and walk the length of the wooden floor, making note of all the uneven areas. It’s not safe for a performer and needs to be stripped. Actually, all the floors need to be stripped.

“Law, I’m telling you, this place was, and always will be *The Garage*. There’s someone out there who wants this place for exactly what it is. We should sell it as such. This place brought people together and made dreams come true...I can’t stand the idea of it being a...Chili’s or a bookstore.”

*What the hell kind of bookstore could fill this square footage?*

Law grumbles under his breath. “Let’s say I trust you...can you honestly restore this as a music venue by yourself? I trusted you with a gut job, but doing the plumbing, electric, the whole nine—it’s a lot. Selling this as a market ready venue is different than selling a shell of a property.”

Law's right. It's a huge job. If I do all this myself, it really will take me a year to paint.

"You should call my dad," I say from the stage. I barely form the words, but from up here, my words echo out to Law who is clear across the main floor. He paces toward me, eyes looking up at the precariously dangling overhead lights. He needs to step to his right before it's death by stage light in the filthy music venue.

"*You* should call your dad," Law says with a pained half-smile.

Running my hands over my face, I realize my facial hair is growing faster than I thought possible. I'm growing it out as a temporary act of rebellion. I had a label tell me my best bet was to emulate Shawn Mendes or Jake Miller, but since at the moment I no longer need to look like I'm trying to join the Backstreet Boys, I'm embracing the full beard.

"My parents don't know I'm back."

"I figured as much. Seems like a good time to tell him."

Groaning, I plant myself on the edge of the stage, letting my legs dangle off the side. "Dad would probably rather hear from you. Don't you guys still golf together?"

Law scratches his head. "We mostly just stand by the golf cart and drink beer. We're both terrible at the game."

"Then why play?"

"Because it's what you do when you're middle-aged and have extra money you don't know what to do with." Law scoffs. "You'll see one day."

*No, I'm pretty sure I'd know what to do with my money. I'd pay off my massive debt.* "Either way, you guys speak the same language. He'd probably send out his guys for free. They'd have this place fixed for you in less than a month."

"Fuck!" Law squeals like a little girl and leaps back with the strength of a gazelle when what looks like a roach on steroids creeps over his foot. I snort to myself. "All right," he says clearing his throat, trying to sidestep the less-than-

masculine moment that I will be giving him a lot of shit about in the future. “What’s the deal with your dad? Ray is the nicest guy. What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of him,” I mumble. “I’m afraid of disappointing him.”

“What’s disappointing?”

Staring over Law’s shoulder at the giant broken neon sign that reads *The Garage*, I avoid his gaze as I admit the truth. “Dad thought dropping out of college was a terrible idea. He told me I was throwing my future away. But my heart was in music, and I knew I could sing. I told him I wanted to move to L.A. and devote everything to becoming a big deal recording artist and performer. He didn’t yell or laugh in my face. Guess what he did.”

“What?”

“He gave me the keys to his old Jeep. He said L.A. was expensive and I shouldn’t go out there with a car payment. Then, he put a couple grand in my bank account and told me I was talented and he couldn’t wait to see what I’d make of myself.”

Law lets out a heavy sigh. “He’s one hell of a dad.”

“Exactly. How do I tell him what I made of myself was *nothing*?” I implied to my parents that I was *on my way*. They just didn’t realize I was *on my way* back to Denver to hide out in my cousin’s home while begging her husband for work.

Law opens his mouth, then presses his lips together in a tight line, holding back whatever he wants to say.

“If Dad knew what was really going on, he’d probably try to convince me to move home permanently. Join the family business. Grow up. But I’m terrified to admit to him—”

I stop myself before I can shove my foot down my throat.

“Admit what?” Law asks furrowing his brows. “Don’t worry. It stays between us.”

“I respect the hell out of my dad. I’m grateful for him and everything he’s done...but...”

“You don’t want his life,” Law finishes for me.

“Yeah.” Dipping my head, I press my lips together. “I feel like an asshole admitting that. There’s nothing wrong with his life. He built a great business for himself. He raised a family. I feel selfish admitting I want more...or different, I guess.”

Law twists his lips and slightly nods as he contemplates the right response. He clasps his hand over my shoulder firmly. “This world takes all types, Miles. We need construction workers *and* we need singers. There will be a day when your responsibilities are going to outweigh your passions. But today isn’t that day. You’re twenty-six. Chasing your dream is exactly what you should be doing right now. Your dad understands that. You’ll put your big boy pants on when it’s time.”

I scoff. “Thanks. Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Would you consider keeping this place? I know the upfront investment of starting a business is a lot, but I know The Garage will turn a hefty profit long-term.”

Law shakes his head before the words are out of my mouth. “It’s not the money, it’s the time. Do you have any idea how much of a commitment it is to run a place like this? Sienna and I are trying to have a baby. I want to be home for dinner and be with my family. Running a place like this would be sixty hours a week and all the wrong shifts. It’s not for me.”

I nod. “Makes sense.”

He raises his brows. “But uh, I bet *you* could handle those hours as a venue manager.” Law teeters his head back and forth. “Hm,” he muses mockingly, “if only you weren’t in such a rush to get out of here. If you decided to stay in Denver, it might be a conversation we could have.” He pops his shoulders and gives me an obvious wink.

“Seriously?” *Hmm, it’s not quite my dream...but adjacent? It’s certainly not construction.* “You could afford it?” I roll my eyes as I look him up and down in his Versace suit on a regular Friday afternoon. “Never mind,” I say. Law paying me a hefty

fee for contract work is actually more like a handout. A handout I desperately need.

“Think about it. If it’s a conversation you want to have, we’ll have it.”

I salute him with two fingers. “Thanks, I will.”

“Good. Oh, and one more thing...” Law takes a few strides toward the main entrance. “I’d like to not go bankrupt because of this reno. Call your dad,” he says over his shoulder before he disappears around the corner.

*Ah, fuck.*

The entry doors open then slam shut, and I make a mental note to replace those with a soft closing door. Hopping off the stage, I hear the door open and close again immediately. Glancing around the room, I check for whatever Law forgot.

“Law?” I call out.

But it’s not my new boss that turns the corner.

*Holy shit, she’s pretty.* The kind of pretty that makes your palms sweat. Her thick blonde hair is so long it’d probably touch her hip bones if it wasn’t in such natural tight curls. She’s wearing a sleek, blue, form-fitting business jumper that screams three very important things. She’s a professional. This woman has money. And she most definitely would not be interested in a twenty-six-year-old bum.

“Hi,” she says assertively as she makes her way over to me. The click of her heels sounds off the concrete floors. In her hand is a large bag of takeout from one of my favorite sandwich shops around the corner, Out West. The aroma of salty, fresh-fried kettle chips is a pleasant interruption from the musky stink of this abandoned building. “Do you work here?”

“Technically, yes.” *I guess now I officially do.* “I’m managing the renovation,” I add as an attempt to seem way more important than I am, in the company of what has to be one of the most stunning women I’ve ever laid eyes on. “We haven’t started yet.”

The closer she gets, the more I can see how lit up her light brown eyes are. “Clearly,” she says as she looks around the mess of the main floor. “But you bought it?”

“Sort of.” I exhale and decide to be honest. “My cousin bought it as an investment. You know this place?”

“*So well.*” She wears a mystified expression on her face as she spins in place looking around. “I basically lived here until I left for college. I was in Atlanta when I heard Dom passed away.”

“Who?”

She locks her gaze on mine. “Dominic Morales. The previous owner. When he inherited this place, it was an old brick warehouse.” She points up to the exposed metal structure. “That’s why the roof is like that and why it’s always so drafty in here.”

“We’ll look into that,” I mumble. The crisscrossed metal beams are top-of-the-line industrial construction, but the roof tiles look questionable. There’s probably little to no insulation.

She shrugs. “I never minded. The chill was a relief especially when there were hundreds of sweaty bodies packed in here for a show.” She shakes her head from side to side as she stares at the bar area like she’s stuck in a memory. “I can’t believe someone bought it. *Wow.*”

Still looking up, I eye the dangling stage light which is teetering dangerously right above her head. Without thinking, I grab her elbow and yank her about a foot to the left. Caught off guard, she stumbles.

“Whoops, I’m sorry. You okay?” She nods as I place both hands on her upper arms, ensuring she’s steady before I hastily let go. “I don’t trust those.” I point overhead at the spotlights pointed toward the stage.

“Ah, my hero.” She smiles at me, her pink lips spreading wide as she studies my face. Holding out her free hand, she says a name I’m sure I’ll remember until my dying breath. “I’m Reese.”

“Miles.” I subtly wipe my palm on my jeans before accepting her handshake.

“Nice to meet you, Miles.”

I’m torn. I really want this conversation to continue, yet I want it to end. On one hand, I’ve spent most of my life letting my emotions rule sovereign like I imagine every musician does. Right now, my emotions are telling me this girl is important. This *moment* is significant. On the other hand, my logic is telling me that she’s a total knockout and so far out of my league, it’s embarrassing. How much more rejection can I take?

“When are you planning on having it open?”

Raking my hand through my hair, I groan. “I have no idea. I’m not even sure what it’ll open as. My cousin, Lawrence, is just selling it as a commercial property. It could become a mega-Starbucks for all we know.”

Her jaw drops so low, she shows off her perfectly lined molars. “A Starbucks,” she deadpans. “You’re shitting me. Do you have any idea what this place used to mean to so many...” She trails off seemingly unable to convey the magnitude of her message. For a moment, I let my eyes linger on her soft, rosy, lipstick-free lips. Their shade of natural pink might be my new favorite color.

Clearing my throat, I break the silence. “Hey, so it’s not safe for you to be in here right now. It’s still a haz—”

“Do you want to share a sandwich?” she asks, cutting me off. “One’s for my boss, but you can share mine.” Holding up the takeout bag in her hand, Reese cocks her head to the side.

“That’s generous.”

She scrunches her face. “And by generous, you mean weird, right?”

I chuckle at her frankness. “A little. You want to share a meal with a stranger?”

She throws her head back and laughs, her thick ringlets bouncing around her face. “You’re *Miles*—so technically no



longer a stranger. Plus, I'll admit, I'm a pretty forward person. But mostly I'm hoping you'll let me give you a sixty-minute elevator pitch on why there's no way in the world you can let this place become a Starbucks."

I raise my brows. "Aren't elevator pitches supposed to be sixty *seconds*?"

She clenches her teeth together before giving me a half-hearted apologetic smile. "Not for me. I've got a lot to say." Her eyes land on the broken neon sign and based on the glazed-over look in her eyes, I know she must have a lot of memories here.

My mind is running.

Now I have questions too.

I squint one eye and nod toward the bag. "Are you willing to share your kettle chips?"

"Yup."

"All right," I say reaching for the bag in her hand. "Pitch away."

**five**

...

The paint is peeling. There are holes in the wall where the fluffy pink insulation is spilling out. The floors are filthy and God knows what spilled and dried on the concrete floors to leave the disgusting dark brown stains. To a normal person, this place looks like an enormous halfway house. But all I see are memories in every corner.

I look up at the run-down stage and I remember the first time I ever sang for a crowd. Glancing at the falling-apart bar, I remember all the tequila shots I most definitely was not old enough to be ordering. Either I had a fantastic fake I.D. or the bartender didn't care. Right behind the torn and tattered curtains, I recall all the time I spent hanging out with performers and bands my dad knew.

I think of all the time I spent here with Petey...

"Hey, is it safe to go backstage?" I ask Miles.

He shrugs at me with a sweet smile. "About as safe as it is out here. Just promise you won't sue me if anything happens."

"Promise," I say over my shoulder, walking past the stage.

I was flabbergasted when I saw the chain links around the front doors of The Garage were cut. I'd walked by the abandoned building for years now. I saw a man in a slick suit exit the building, and I just couldn't help myself. After all these years...

I had to see it.

I certainly didn't expect the new owner to be such eye candy. He towers over me even in my heels. His sturdy, muscular frame definitely looks built for construction work, and yet he's got a baby face hiding underneath his short, trimmed beard. The minute I laid eyes on Miles, I realized I might have a type. Holy hell is he distracting. I never thought a grown man who wears a beanie paired with a buffalo plaid flannel, and the teeniest gauges in his ears, would get me going, but today is a day full of surprises.

I also didn't expect to open the door to the backstage area and see the same green couch on which I had sex for the first time...and so many times after. It's dusty and presently looks more gray than green, but it's still there. In the same position, pushed up against the wall by the back loading door. The very door that I used to sneak in through when I didn't snag tickets to a sold-out show.

"Can you help me pull this out?"

"You sure you want to touch that?" Looking over my shoulder, Miles's face is scrunched up in concern. "I'm pretty sure you could get herpes from touching that."

I snicker. "I'll risk it." I hesitate before I place my hand on the armrest, feeling the disgusting grimy cloth under my hands. I remind myself I have hand sanitizer in my satchel before I really commit and tug. For a moment, I'm convinced all my Pilates is paying off because the couch hurtles backward with ease. But when I look to my right, I realize Miles has effortlessly yanked the heavy couch from the wall with one hand, refusing to put the bag of takeout down on any of the filthy surfaces.

"What are you looking for?" he asks.

I point at a cluster of bricks that was hidden by the back of the couch. Across four bricks is a black heart in graffiti. In the center, initials. This was the very spot a boy told me he loved me for the first time. It was also the first time I said it back. Then, I lost my virginity, nestled into this couch.

"Ah," Miles says with a knowing head nod. "So, you must be RR. Who is PM?"

I shut my eyes for a moment, getting lost in the memory...

I was so nervous that night, and so was he—but for very different reasons. I was shaky and in shambles, completely in love and ready to take the big leap with the man I was certain I'd have children with one day. Petey's palms were sweating because he was about to take the stage at his first sold-out show. He was performing a brand-new song he was so worried about. So, I decided when he was feeling the most unsure about himself to give him every part of me, to show him how much faith I had in him...how much I loved him. Even at seventeen, *I was so sure*.

Petey was tender and sweet. He didn't care about the huge crowd waiting for him to take the stage. He took his time with me. The minute his show was over he was right back in my arms and held me on this couch for hours, thanking me for loving him and for the most sacred gift I could've ever given him.

Together, I thought we were invincible. If I could just block out all the rest of the bullshit that would follow between us, it is a perfect memory. I miss him...

The version of Petey who used to really love me.

It took a long time to accept that he was gone. The new Petey, or the real Petey—I'm still not sure—doesn't make love. He fucks. Every other rhyme he writes these days is about a ménage à trois.

"Just puppy love," I say. "He's long gone. But RR is indeed me. Reese Reyes."

"Is Reyes—"

"Puerto Rican." I cut in to save him from an awkward guessing situation. "My dad's mother." Dad was born in the U.S. but once Grandpa passed, Abuela moved back to Puerto Rico. She still hates America. She only came here for my papa.

"You speak Spanish?" Miles asks.

"Not well." I chuckle affectionately thinking about Abuela. She still refuses to speak a word of English. I know just

enough Spanish to wish her a happy birthday, and a merry Christmas, and to tell her I love her old grumpy ass.

Miles reaches out and bats at one of my loose tendrils of hair. “Explains where these pretty curls come from.”

Flexing my abdomen to fight the swoop in my stomach, I press my lips together to control my widening smile. “Thank you. That was sweet.” *And smooth. Points for you, my friend.*

I tuck the loose piece of hair behind my ear but it’s pointless, it pops back free, too thick to be contained. I love it when a man compliments something other than my tits or ass. That old record is tired. *See me.* The *real* me—my sassy brazenness and my wild curly hair.

“Sorry,” he says while adjusting the soft rim of his beanie, as though he’s embarrassed.

“For what?”

“I’m not hitting on you. I just...”

I squint at him and tilt my head to the side as his words trail off into nothingness. “Okay.” I raise my eyebrows at him. “Too bad.”

“Oh, you really *are* forward, aren’t you?” His smile is laced. Somehow, he seems both taken aback and impressed.

I open my mouth to respond, but I’m hit with a sudden sense of déjà vu as I stare at Miles’s handsome face. I’ve never been attracted to a man who looks *this* “Colorado.” He’s basically a sexy version of a lumberjack—except sort of stylish. It’s a strange combination, and I’m definitely interested. But I digress. This strange thumping in my chest isn’t just because of the hot guy, or the flirty conversation. It’s something else...

Like I’m remembering a feeling. The flutter of excitement circles in my stomach and funnels through my limbs one by one, as if I can feel the blood rushing to the tips of my fingertips and toes. What is this? *Hope? Nerves?* It’s been so long since I’ve felt like this and I have no idea what sparked it. It’s this place...

## The Garage.

So many memories, laughs, and monumental moments. It was the place I felt most like myself. It was a time when I was...*oh*. It becomes so clear.

The déjà vu feeling is *happiness*. I'm sure of it. So why do I feel like crying? Why am I suddenly so overwhelmed?

I let out a quick breath as I meet Miles's concerned expression. Aware of how long it's been since I've said anything, I interject with the first thing that comes to mind. "Do you want to eat outside? I need some air."

"Sure."

It's too brisk outside to enjoy a picnic. I'm hoping the stench of piss and mold in here is a valid enough excuse to make my sudden and desperate need for fresh air—due to an impending emotional outburst—a little less obvious.

Miles follows me through the front entry and out into the gleaming sunlight. While it looks like it's springtime and sunshine, in reality, it's cold enough that I know my nipples are eagerly putting on a show through my thin outfit. The end of March is tricky in Colorado. Flowers are sprouting across the country, but our snowy season isn't quite done with its assault.

I plant my ass at the edge of the sidewalk, my knees bent, and my feet resting at the edge of the quiet street. Miles stands to my right and tents his hand over his forehead, his lips turned down as he stares at me.

"What?" I ask, reaching for my bag of sandwiches.

"I didn't take you for a pop-a-squat-on-the-curb kind of girl." His smile is teasing.

"If it wasn't so damn cold, I'd take my shoes off too. Don't be fooled. Under these clothes"—I gesture to Quinn's fancy business outfit that I stole...*ahem borrowed*—"lies a hot mess."

Miles groans as he sits down next to me. I wonder if he can also feel the freezing concrete under his ass through his

thick denim jeans. He must be warm enough because he slides off his flannel button-down and drapes it over me. I smile and snuggle into the warmth of his thick shirt, relishing the smell of his cologne.

“Are you sure you’re not hitting on me?”

He laughs. “That was just being a gentleman. I run hot anyway.”

*Liar.* I see goosebumps on his now-exposed muscular forearms. His scant arm hair matches the espresso color on the top of his head.

“Well, thank you.” I pull out my French dip sandwich wrapped in grease-stained brown paper. I only had a Coke Zero and a latte for breakfast. I’m starving, and at the moment am slightly annoyed I offered to share my sandwich. Tearing the sub in half, I hand the larger piece to Miles.

“Thanks,” he says bringing the sandwich to his lips but pausing immediately when he sees the look of horror on my face. “What?”

“Wait for the au jus, man. What’s your problem?” Unpacking the little container of sauce, I set it between us.

“I like ‘em without the sauce.” He takes a big bite and I balk.

“That’s like ordering a cheeseburger with no cheese.”

Covering his mouth and searching my bewildered expression he asks, “Have you ever tried it?” He holds up his half of the sandwich.

“Sauceless?”

He nods, his eyes locked on mine.

“Nope.” I dip my half into the salty broth. “I prefer it wet.” I flash him a playfully wicked smile and his eyes pop into wide circles. “Dripping,” I continue and he tries to hold in his chuckle. “Absolutely soaked,” I add before I fill my mouth with Out West’s signature sandwich.



Now, he's laughing hard. "Okay, I knew it. You are *trouble*," he manages through light huffs. "Anyway, I owe you an audience."

Twisting my lips, I shoot him a puzzled glance. "Huh?" I mumble.

"The Garage..." He holds up the last bite of his sandwich. "You share your lunch and I hear your ideas about this place. Right?"

Chewing as fast as I can, I swallow the lump of bread and tender meat. "This place was iconic. Everyone was devastated when Dom passed. He didn't have any friends or family who were willing to take it over, so the bank snapped it up and let it rot. But when it was in fighting shape it was the most—"

He holds up his palm. "Believe me, I know. I used to love this place."

"Oh. So, you know it well too, then?"

He shrugs. "My name isn't graffitied backstage or anything, but yeah, I used to catch shows here all the time. Actually, not to name-drop but I got to see Petey perform here before he really blew up. *Goddamn*, he puts on a good show. I caught his concert in L.A. while he was on tour for his album, *Radar*. An entire stadium—sold out. It was a great show. But I think he was better when he performed right here." Miles throws his head back toward the brick building behind us.

For a moment there, I was really floating in the high of *happy*.

"Yeah," I mumble. "I caught a few of his shows here too." *Every single fucking show*. "You're a fan of rap?"

"More than a fan." As Miles stretches out his legs, his knee bumps against my outer thigh and I invite the delicious nerves to have an all-out rager my chest cavity. "I love hip-hop. I consider myself more of an R&B singer though."

Turning my head slowly with bulging eyes, I look at Miles like a shark who got a whiff of blood. "You're a singer?" I should've known. My past is like a super magnet. I knew my

attraction to this stranger was rooted in something deeper than his sexy, crooked smile.

He trails his fingers over his beard slowly, buying time, like he's reluctant to say more. "I'm trying to be. I stayed in L.A. so I could be closer to the labels I'm trying to sign with. I'm back home for a little breather. It's been *hard* to get traction."

His eyes drop to the concrete and I recognize that hollow expression on his face. Poor guy must be getting his ass-kicked by the industry.

I tuck my feet in as a car slowly creeps through the alley as if it could run over my toes from way over there. Grimacing, I watch the driver's irritated expression when he realizes he's ventured down the wrong road. No matter, this street will feed right back into sixteenth street if he follows the detour. Downtown Denver is built like a grid. It takes more work to get lost than not.

"Sing something," I demand, then scrunch my face. "Sorry, I mean—*may I hear you sing something?*"

His brows arch in surprise. "Right now?"

"Yeah." I flash him a coy smile. "I'm curious if your definition of R&B is Justin Bieber after he got tatted up."

Miles guffaws. "Not quite. No shade to Mr. Bieber, but I prefer the older stuff."

"Older?" I raise an eyebrow. "Are we talking like Marvin Gaye and *Midnight Love* old?"

He chuckles. "First of all, I will never get tired of the original 'Sexual Healing.' None of these covers do it justice. Marvin sang it best."

"Agreed."

"But I guess a lot of my R&B inspiration comes from the early 2000s."

"Ginuwine?" I ask with a grin that starts to take over my entire face. I'm loving where this conversation is going.

Miles nods enthusiastically. “And Usher, Maxwell, Sammie, John Legend, Pharrell—just to name a few.”

“Ten bucks says ‘Bed’ by J. Holiday is your go-to karaoke song.”

“For shame, Reese,” he says with a gasp before he shoots me a wink. “It’s ‘Differences.’ I still listen to that song once a week, I swear.”

“*Stop it.*” Miles looks concerned at my reaction. After fishing through my satchel still draped around my shoulder, I pull out my phone and hand it over. “Open Spotify and just press play. Guess what I was listening to earlier today.”

He does as I instruct and the familiar melodic intro to Ginuwine’s “Differences” rings into the air.

“*Damn.*” He looks more impressed than anything else. “Aren’t we two peas?” Setting my phone face up between us, our impromptu picnic date now has a little mood music.

“All right,” I make the come here motion with two fingers, “let’s hear your chops. Sing along.” I start the song over but turn the volume down.

“Uh, no.” He shakes his head and rises as smacks his hands together, then brushes them on his pants trying to rid himself of the grease from Out West’s kettle chips. *Good luck.* That grease really seeps into the pores. “Do you want a drink? I’ve got water and kombucha in the Jeep.” He nods toward his hunter-green vehicle in the gravel parking lot beside us. His bumper is so rusty and tattered that it looks like it might pop off at any minute.

“Kombucha?” *Um, hell no.*

“Don’t worry, it’s in a cooler.” He retrieves a precarious looking mason jar from his car and returns to me in a hurry. “I make it myself.”

“You make it?”

“I tinker with a lot of stuff. I make kombucha, yogurt...I garden a little.”

“And sing R&B?”

He grins. “Weird, huh?”

“*Interesting*,” I correct him.

“In a good way?” He tugs on the rim of his black beanie and a tuft of wavy dark brown hair becomes visible.

“I think it’s a great thing to be interesting in a world full of boring, predictable people. Don’t you?”

Holding out the jar he asks me, “Want to try?”

*Gross. No.* But he’s so damn cute. We have the same taste in music. Fuuuck does his shirt, that’s wrapped tight around me, smell delicious. “Sure.”

Taking a swig from the bottle, I force myself to swallow. It tastes like a rotten lemon-vinegar foot soda. I try to use my own saliva as a chaser.

“What do you think?” he asks. “It’s not my best batch. But also, not my worst.”

“Well, it’s...” I search through my mental thesaurus trying to find a nice way to say *disgusting*.

“It’s good for you,” Miles offers.

“Okay, let’s go with that.” I set the jar down.

“So, why not?”

“What now?”

“Why not sing something for me? I’m curious. Are you any good?”

His smile is soft and knowing like he’s got a secret. “If I say I have a great voice, does that make me cocky or confident?”

I shrug. “Depends on how you say it.” A sly smile crawls across my face. “Better yet, *sing* it.”

He chuckles. “No.”

“Why not?”

He opens his mouth like he’s got an immediate response, then shuts it as he changes his mind. “Because I’m on the spot

and you're *really* pretty." He gives me an innocent smile and I'm tempted to just want to swallow up his lips right now.

Instead, I scoff. "Now who's forward?"

Tapping the back of his knuckle against his chin, his eyes droop. "All right you want the truth?" I nod, keeping my eyes locked on his. "I haven't felt like singing lately. I'm a little—"

"Burnt out?"

"Something like that. I was hoping a little time at home would energize me again. L.A. feels like—"

"Battle?"

He nods again. "Exactly."

I roll my eyes at myself as I ball up my fists against my legs. "Sorry," I mutter. "That's rude of me."

"What's rude?" Miles asks as he cocks his head to the side.

"I have a bad habit of finishing people's sentences. It's off-putting."

The most charming, genuine, grin spreads across his face. "Not to me. I like it. I feel like you understand what I'm trying to say. It makes the conversation a little less lonely."

"Lonely conversations?"

"L.A." He points the tip of his thumb to his chest. "People out there talk nonstop about nothing I want to hear." He grabs my phone and presses the volume button as a new song begins. "This playlist is old school," he says, "I like it."

"You know this song?"

To my shock and surprise, Miles answers my question by singing along to a few lines of Frankie J and Baby Bash's "Obsession" in perfect pitch. *On the spot, my ass. This man's voice is flawless.* I want to listen to him serenade this entire song, but my phone vibrates in his hands and he immediately stops. "Your work is calling," he says. "Sorry, didn't mean to look." He hands my phone back to me.

“Ignore it,” I insist, “please. Keep going.” But the moment’s over. I miss the call from the office but he’s silent as his hazel eyes lock on mine. I think they are hazel. They are green around the irises but with light patches of honey brown. “You’ve got an amazing voice.”

“Thanks,” he says but shrugs me off like he’s used to the compliment and doesn’t know if he believes it. “Are you needed back at work?”

*Oh fuck.* Checking my phone, I realize I’m well past the end of my lunch hour anyway. Then again, it’s not like I’m paralegal of the year or anything. Still, I promised Eli his lunch, which undoubtedly is cold by now.

“Yeah, I should go.” Shrugging off his shirt, I return it to him.

“Can I give you a ride?”

Standing, I jut my chin to the left. “I’m just a couple blocks that way. I’m a paralegal at Henley & Associates.” Bending slightly at the knees, I bounce in place, trying to drum up a little warmth.

He drapes his shirt back around me. “At least take this then.”

Honestly, I’m fine. I don’t need it. The walk will warm me up, but it’s a gesture so I gratefully take it and wrap myself in the masculine scent. *Mmm.*

“Thank you.”

I’m so familiar with this game. He lends me his shirt. I’ll offer to get it dry cleaned and returned, but of course, being the gentleman he is, he’ll offer to pick it up instead. Likely, he’ll show up with flowers, or if he’s intuitive—a cookie, because baked goods are the way to my heart. If he’s tacky, he’ll drop by with a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, but hey for a man that smiles like that—it’d work. He’ll ask me out to a nice dinner, and I’ll wear something form-fitting to let him know I am *really* interested. I’ll fight him for the bill, but eventually cave when he insists on paying. He’ll be pleasantly surprised that when I like a guy, I have *no qualms* about putting out on

the first date. Life's too damn short not to go for what you want.

I know exactly how this will play out...

Except I've been lingering here on the sidewalk for an obnoxious amount of time and he still hasn't asked for my number.

"You want me to just bring this back to you sometime?" I ask, trying to bait him.

"Don't worry. Keep it. It looks good on you."

*Wait. What?*

I try once more. "I got distracted from our conversation earlier." I point to the entry of The Garage. "I still need to make my case for keeping the essence of this place. Maybe we could meet up again, sometime?"

He looks away, suddenly finding the building to our right fascinating. "It's a little out of my hands. It's my cousin's investment and the only language he talks is profit. It's why he's so successful." He twists his lips into a reluctant smile as he meets my eyes again. "But if you know anyone with a couple million dollars they don't know what to do with and are interested in buying this place, please point them my way."

"I'll do that." I begin making a mental list of anyone I know who might be willing to save the beloved place of my youth. "So..."

"So..." Miles parrots me but offers nothing more.

"Um...well, okay. I guess that's that, then." I wonder if he can hear the slight irritation in my voice. Stupid, sexy, man I just met. *Just ask for my number.* "It was nice to meet you, Miles. Good luck with the renovation."

Turning on my heel and taking two paces down the sidewalk, I'm relieved when he calls out to me.

"Hey, Reese!" I spin around with a smug smile on my face. *Here we go.* I have a sassy response of *it took you long enough* all prepared.

“Yes?”

“Sorry, I forgot my manners. Thank you for sharing your lunch. I enjoyed talking.”

I blink at him, waiting for him to continue but all that’s left is his earnest expression.

“You’re welcome. Take care,” I eventually force myself to say. This time my smile is clipped.

*What the damn hell was that?* As I continue down the sidewalk, I find myself wondering if I’m starting to lose my touch.



**six**

...

“You’re visibly sweating,” Sienna says as she throws her fancy Audi in park in my parent’s generously sized driveway. It’s large enough to accommodate all of my dad’s work trucks. “What’s your problem? Your mom and dad are the nicest human beings on the planet.”

Pulling my beanie down over my eyebrows, I groan from the passenger seat. “I really don’t want to do this.”

Sienna ruffles her bangs and checks her makeup in the rearview mirror. “You’re being overdramatic.”

“Sienna,” I deadpan. “The last face-to-face conversation I had with my dad, I told him I was destined to do bigger things than construction. Now here I am, asking for his help with my new *construction* job.”

For the past two weeks, I’ve been at The Garage from sunup to sundown, trying to clean up as much of the wreckage as I could on my own. I’m physically sore from hauling trash, scrubbing walls, and scraping the floors. I’ve put in at least fifty hours of manual labor and I’ve barely scratched the surface. Even with a back strap and a dolly, no way I’ll be able to pull the old kitchen appliances out myself. Not to mention the bar counter needs to be stripped, broken to pieces, and completely replaced. I hate to admit it, but I need help.

I need Dad and my brothers. It’s the only reason I called yesterday and told him I was back in town. Of course, Mom insisted the entire family get together for an impromptu welcome home party.

I have no idea how to explain the closest I got to getting paid for my music was the time a homeless guy tipped me at a karaoke joint. A *homeless* guy tipped me. Hence, a man living on the street, that smelt like a rat crawled up his ass and died, felt sorry enough for me that he gave me his last dollar. That just about sums up my musical career.

“Well, you have exactly two seconds to pull it together because here comes your mom.” Sienna slaps a dramatic toothy smile on her face and opens the car door when Mom comes hurtling down the entry steps and over to the car. Mom’s still in an apron that’s covered with white powder. *Of course, she’s baking. Dammit.*

Sienna embraces my mother with an enthusiastic hug which buys me a brief moment to collect myself and put on a happy face for my sweet mother, who still makes a homemade pie every time her sons come over to visit. She dedicated her life to the men in her family. For years she packed lunches, did mountains of laundry, scheduled every single doctor’s appointment, drove us to every soccer or football practice and game, and helped with homework. She was everything for me and my brothers. My dad worked really hard at his blue-collar job to provide for all of us. My mom worked even harder taking care of us. I wanted to make it big and buy her a Maserati or a diamond necklace worth more than Sienna’s house. She deserves it.

“My baby!” Mom squeals with her arms open wide as I step out of Sienna’s luxury SUV.

“Hey, Mom.”

She hurls herself into my chest with such force I almost stumble backward. She’s a mess of emotions as she hugs me. Toggling from laughing to crying, to screeching in glee, I can’t quite make out what she’s saying, but it’s something along the lines of, *I missed my baby boy so much, and I made all your favorite foods, your brothers are already here, and how dare you not tell your own mother you moved back home?*

We walk awkwardly into the house because she refuses to release me from her arms. I barely shuffle my feet so I don’t

trample her, but once we're through the door, my big brother, Ray Junior, comes to my rescue.

"*Geez, Ma.* Give the boy some room." I'm tall at six feet, but Junior still dwarfs me with his six-foot-five height. He's built like a Harlem Globetrotter—tall, athletic, and kind of awkward. "What's up hot shot?" he asks as he pulls my beanie off my head before slapping it against my chest. "Old rule still stands." He ruffles my hair in that dickish way big brothers do.

"That's right," Mom agrees, "no hats in the house." She pushes me from behind, ushering me into the dining room where she's laid out a feast that could more than feed the entire Denver Broncos defensive line.

"*Mom!* Please tell me you didn't do all this for me." She prepared what looks like a twenty-pound roast. All the fixings too. There are at least four casseroles on the long wooden table.

"Yup, you spoiled brat," my brother Lucas says, rising from his chair to greet me. "Mom pulls out all the stops for her *baby*," he mocks. *Asshole*. But he hugs me warmly. My brothers aren't actually assholes. They are just, for lack of a better description, *big brothers*. More accurately they are big brothers with full-time jobs, wives, and children, and worried the youngest member of their family has his head stuck in the clouds and is never going to grow up.

"Where is everyone?"

"Rachel and the girls are out back with Dad. They can't get enough of that swing set," Lucas says.

"Molly will be on the way once the baby wakes up," Junior adds as he walks into the dining room. Pulling the lid off a CorningWare dish, he swipes a baby potato and pops it in his mouth whole before Mom smacks his hand. Snatching the lid from Junior's hand, she quickly replaces it before too much steam escapes.

"How's the newest Lorren?" I ask Junior.

"Handsome little thing. Light of my life. But I barely get to hold him. He's a mama's boy—on the tit twenty-four-seven,"

Junior responds through a mouthful.

“Junior!” Mom scolds. “Don’t you speak about my grandbaby like that. He’s only eight weeks old. Of course he’s nursing around the clock.”

“Hey, hey, there’s nothing wrong with a mama’s boy.” He points at my chest. “They always turn out to be the favorites anyway.”

Grumbling, I roll my eyes. “I’m going to say hi to Dad.”

Dad’s pushing my youngest niece on the swings. Her squeals of delight fill the air. It’s a picture-perfect Sunday afternoon. The sun is shining. The sky is clear and the air is crisp. The kids are gleefully playing. With everything in me, I wish I craved this kind of suburban peace. I’m not sure if I’m different, or just a fool, but I always imagined my life on stage, doing what I love.

Maybe that’s the problem.

I’ve spent too much time chasing what I love instead of being a man. A man like my dad who came from the bad part of a trailer park and worked his ass off for thirty years just to give his sons a better life than he had.

“Miles!” My dad beams at me from across the lawn. With one more quick push to my giggly niece, he maneuvers around the swing and hustles to me. “My God,” he mumbles as he yanks me into a hug. He smells faintly of cigarettes and cleaner like he smoked half a cig and then tried to hide the odor with fresh air and Lysol. Mom would kill him if she knew he was still sneaking cigarettes. It’s a habit Dad and my brothers keep from their wives. Not that I have anyone to hide it from, but my voice was far too important. I was never tempted to pick up smoking.

“Hey, Dad. Good to see you.”

“How long has it been?” he asks as he repetitively slams his bear paw of a hand against my back.

“Three months since we’ve talked on the phone. Two years since I’ve seen you?” I couldn’t afford to come home for the holidays the past two Christmases and I was far too

embarrassed to tell my parents that. Instead, I lied and told them I'd booked a couple of shows that were amazing opportunities I couldn't get out of. That particular lie was just the tip of the bullshit iceberg I've been floating on.

He tsks his tongue as he grabs my shoulders and holds me at arm's length. Our eyes are level, our heights are almost identical. "Too long, son. That's *far* too long to be away from home."

He examines me from head to toe, a wide grin on his face. "What?" I ask as I study his peculiar expression.

"There's something about seeing your youngest all grown up." He shakes his head. "Makes me feel incredibly old."

"You are incredibly old," I tease.

"I could still probably kick your ass," he says with a smirk.

"Probably."

Dad nods to the cooler on the patio. "You want a beer?"

We settle into the old patio set my parents have had since I was maybe five years old. The cushions are worn and tattered. The ugly floral pattern is outdated, but to this day, Mom is frugal. If it's still working, she won't replace it. If it's not working, Dad will find a way to fix it himself. Reason number one hundred thousand I wanted to find a way to treat my family to the finer things in life.

Dad hands me a beer that's dripping from the icy bath of the cooler. I nearly rip the flesh of my hand around the bottlecap before I realize it's not a twist-off. "What the fuck is this?" I stare at the blue label. "Hard cider?"

"Your mother has been getting adventurous with her beer runs." He laughs. "Your brothers cleaned out the Coors before you got here." He fishes out a Leatherman utility tool from his pocket, then extends the hook that doubles as a beer bottle opener.

"Thanks," I say over the hiss of the beer bottle opening. I take a reluctant swig. "*Dammit.*"

Dad widens his eyes, his bushy dark eyebrows raising as he lowers his voice. “It’s pretty good, isn’t it?”

“Hate to admit it, but yeah.”

“Don’t tell your mother.” He shakes his head. “I don’t want to hear ‘I told you so.’”

*Ha.* “Noted.” I guzzle down the cider, enjoying the tang of the sour apple. It’s really not that far off from the kombucha mom taught me how to make, but it’s better. It’s sweeter and a buzz is guaranteed.

“So, what’s this about you and Law getting into business together?”

“We’re not in business together. I needed a job and Law needed some help with a renovation.”

“Weren’t you working in L.A.?”

I fix my gaze forward even though I feel his eyes on me. “Bartending wasn’t paying the bills and my music is still in that costs-me-more-than-it-makes-me phase.”

“If you needed help, why didn’t you come to me?”

I sink a little lower into my seat. He’s trying to sound casual, but I can tell he’s wounded. From my peripherals, I see his jeans are a little dusty. Dad’s a workhorse. No doubt he logged a few hours this morning before the obligatory family get-together.

“Because I’m a grown-ass man and I shouldn’t be your burden.”

He holds up his palms before popping open his cider. “I get it. But I’m sorry you see it that way. You’re going to keep staying with Law and Sienna?”

I tip the bottom of the bottle into the air before I set my empty drink on the glass patio table. With my eyes fixed on the back section of the fence, I say, “Possibly.” My sigh matches my energy—completely exhausted. “I have to be where I can be seen if I want anything to come of my music. I was thinking about trying Atlanta for a while. I think I can find

a cheaper place to stay or find a few roommates or something.” *Preferably one that doesn’t deal drugs this time.*

“Okay.”

“I know what you’re going to say.” I shrug my shoulders.

“What am I going to say?” Dad says, his face pulling in concern.

“That I can come back to Lorren Family Construction anytime I want because the door is always open for me.” Forcing myself to face him, I lock onto his dark eyes. “It’s the smart thing to do—”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it? It’s what you always used to say,” I mumble as I pick up the empty bottle, craving a swig, but set it back down when I realize I already drained it. This is the reason I don’t call Dad every time I want to give up on my dream. He’s the final push I’d need to jump right into a life I don’t want.

Dad drains his bottle and then sits silently. For a moment, it’s just my nieces shrieking and hollering at the top of their lungs. We listen to them argue about which area of the yard should be home base and safe in their game of tag. Finally, Dad speaks.

“We got a couple of calls from creditors on your student loans last month.”

My stomach twists and gurgles. “*What?*”

“Did you forget who co-signed those loans? I’m the next contact and you haven’t been answering the calls, apparently. Your deferment is up and you’re late on payments.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. “I thought the deferment was good for another—”

“That hardship deferment is only applicable if you had *finished* school, Miles.”

I swallow and take deep breaths, trying to control the nausea. Whenever I have to talk about money, I feel the bile in



my stomach start to bubble up. “I’m sorry. I’ll call them first thing tomorrow and clear it up.”

“With what money? You just said you couldn’t afford to live on your own.” He squints his eyes. “I took care of the next six months. My gift to you. That should buy you some time to figure out your next move.”

I squint my eyes at him. “Dad. *No*. I don’t—”

“Miles, it’s *my* credit on the line too. *So, I took care of it*. But promise me you’ll come to me when you need help. Hiding this shit will tear a man’s soul apart. Believe me,” he says and lets out a low whistle. “I had much worse than student loan debt when I was your age.”

It’s probably a bad time to mention I’m up to my ears in credit card debt too. All my demos were produced with an Amex that no sane lender should’ve given me. I was just so sure my big break would come in time.

“I’m going to pay you back,” I choke out.

“I know you will. It’s okay.”

“It’s not, Dad.” I plant my fist against my forehead. “It’s not okay. I just thought I would’ve had something to show for all this work by now.”

Dad stares at me again and this time he waits patiently until I meet his gaze. It’s the same look he’d give me when I was growing up and he caught me, Junior, and Lucas in a lie about throwing the football in the house. Breaking the window was the lesser offense. It was lying that really grinded his gears. “Are you still happy doing this, Miles?”

*Honestly? I don’t know.* “It’s the only thing I envisioned for my life. I still love to sing, I just need the success part to hurry up and get here. It only takes one record deal to turn everything around.”

Dad points across the yard to his granddaughters squawking and giggling as they chase each other around the swing set and treehouse combination that he built with Lucas, wooden board by wooden board. “You’ll see one day. There is more than one definition of success in life. Happiness is a big

part of success. I think you should spend some time thinking about that.”

“About what?”

“If you’re happy.”

I blink at him and swallow the lump in my throat. “Are you?” I ask looking around the yard. “Is all this enough?”

A confident smile takes over his face. “I’m happy. I’m fulfilled.” Raising one brow at me, he adds, “Not because of what I do for a living, but because of who I do it for. I’m proud I’m the kind of dad that my sons can come to if they need something...and I can actually help. I didn’t know what I was working so hard for until I met your mother. Even more so when she had Junior. I realized my dreams were my family’s dreams. What I need, is for you guys to have what you need. One day you’re going to see what’ll fulfill you isn’t in fame or success. You want my advice?”

“Sure.”

“Stay here. Settle down. Find a stable job, even if it’s not with Lorren Family Construction. Start a family. Find a good girl who loves you for you. Even ask your brothers—it’s the best feeling in the world. Your vision will change, I promise you. This life will make a whole lot more sense. I’m due for some more grandbabies anyway.”

I snort. “You just got another one.”

Dad grumbles under his breath. “Yeah, Junior’s boy is a mama’s boy. That baby won’t let anyone hold him. Screams bloody murder every time I’m in a one-foot radius. I have to wait until he’s old enough to bribe to really make my mark as Papa.”

I shake my head. Junior is a walking replica of my dad. Junior favors Dad the most in appearance. They talk the same, eat the same, and even walk the same. “Well, you’ll have to make do with what you have because no woman is lining up for this broke joke.”

I’ve been trying to push Reese from my mind every time she pops into my head, which for the past two weeks has been

often. *Fuck*, if she wasn't the sexiest woman I've ever laid eyes on...and fun, forward, a little sassy, and sweet. Not to mention her excellent taste in music. From what I could tell, she's all the things I'd handpick for my dream girl. But my life is a mess and she's so far out of my league, it hurts.

If I called her, what would I say? *Hey, want to hang out in my cousin's house and stream a movie on her Netflix account? I can treat you to microwave popcorn and tap water. Oh, and if you're really feeling me, we can take things to the bedroom where we'll need to be really quiet because you can hear everything through the vents of my bedroom, which is in the basement of a house I can't afford to pay rent in.*

"What do you need for your renovation?" Dad asks. I'm yanked from my sour musings of pining after the girl I know I can't get.

"The concrete floors need to be resealed. Both bathrooms are a complete gut job. The kitchen too. The entire building needs insulation work. The rest is cosmetic which I can probably handle on my own."

"Or," Dad singsongs teetering his head from side to side, "you could ask for help and not work yourself into an early grave."

"I need the money, Dad. I can't afford to outsource too much of the work and Law has a budget in mind. I think I can do most of it myself, there are just a few things I can't—"

"You don't have to do any of it by yourself. If Law has a budget, then we'll stay well within it. Labor is easy. You can have my crew for free. I have an in with most of the vendors in town. We can get you wholesale discounts on the appliances you need. The place has been inspected?"

"Twice."

"Good, then it should be no problem. I'll make some calls first thing tomorrow. Hell, I'll pitch in with labor myself."

I bury my head in my hands, smelling the salty musk from my sweaty palms. The compounding pressure building in my

head is a mix of relief, embarrassment, anxiety, and uncertainty. “Why are you being so generous?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” He looks offended as his eyebrows furrow in my direction.

“I’m the fuck up of this family. I wasted half of my twenties and have nothing to show for it. And you just...” Dragging my hand over my face, I groan.

“Just what?” he asks.

“Always pick me back up every time I fall. I don’t know when I’ll ever be able to repay you, yet I keep adding to my debt.”

*Just when I think I can’t feel lower.*

He reaches over and pats my knee. “I’m your dad. You owe me nothing. It’s as simple as that. Like I said...you’ll see one day.”

**seven**

...

“**W**hat the hell are you wearing?” Addie asks from the seat across from me. She’s currently buried by two oversized Savannah cats that are purring so loud it sounds like someone’s muffler is on the fritz. I snuggle deeper into Miles’s button-up shirt as I peel my eyes away from my phone to glare at her.

“*What?* Buffalo plaid is in,” I bellyache.

Quinn, to my left, knocks her bare knee against mine and gives me a subtle knowing look.

Mani, on my other side, who is far more outspoken says, “Hell no it’s not. Especially not in April. Even Nono has better fashion sense than that.”

Noa cringes at her nickname. I know she hates we call her Nono but it’s far too late. After almost a decade of friendship, there’s no going back.

“Hey!” Noa shouts from the kitchen behind us as she empties a bag of microwave popcorn into a large glass bowl. “*Unnecessary.*”

It’s bizarre having girls’ night at Joel’s place. *Sorry.* Addie and Joel’s place. I’ll never get used to that. It was literally less than a year ago that the youngest of our friend group lost her virginity, *at twenty-five.* Sure, she was a bit of a late bloomer, but she waited for the right one. Fast forward about six months and here she is, living in their shared penthouse, raising cat children, and from what I understand making up for lost time by basically living in the sheets with her new fiancé. Pretty

soon we're going to start forwarding her mail to 123 Underneath Joel, Denver, Colorado.

"But seriously," Noa continues as she joins us in the minimally furnished, yet still luxurious looking living room, "what are you drinking?" She glances at the brown glass bottle tucked next to my thigh.

"Kombucha. It's growing on me."

"What the fuck?" Noa's usually the soft-spoken sweetheart of our group. Her present language is a pretty clear indication my best friends think I'm having a psychotic break.

"Does this shirt belong to a new guy?" Quinn nudges me.

"There is no new guy." The truth is, I flirted with Miles shamelessly. This stupid flannel shirt—that I haven't washed since he gave it to me two weeks ago—is a souvenir from the first time I've been shot down by a guy since...well, Petey, I guess. But I don't know if *shot down* and *had my heart fucking ripped to shreds* is the same thing? "It's just a shirt," I mutter. "It's cozy."

"Mhmm," Quinn says. "Just a shirt."

I take a long swig of my drink, then point my finger right at her forehead. "No. No, thank you. I don't need commentary from the Happily Ever After Peanut Gallery, *thanks much*."

"Happily Ever After Peanut Gallery?" Addie asks.

I rub my hands together, warming up my verbal assault. I point to Addie. "Marrying the *first* dude you slept with." Pointing to Noa, I add, "Engaged to a goddamn A-list movie star. Aaand, my personal favorite," I shift my finger back to Quinn and poke her cheek, "married her brother's NFL football idol and accidentally fell in love...*hard*."

"Fake married," Quinn objects.

Turning the corners of my lips down, I nod in contemplation. "And how's the fake sex?" She rolls her eyes but doesn't defend herself. "That's what I thought. You're all on a different orbit than I am at the moment which is why the

only opinion I care about is the other stag member of the group.”

I give Amani my best puppy dog eyes.

“Opinion on what?” she asks as she coils her crimson hair into a topknot on her head.

“Is my shirt weird?” I tug on the collar. I realize I’m biased, but maybe this shirt looks better on Miles. Maybe I’m only this obsessed and can’t stop thinking about him because he’s most certainly not thinking about me. *Is this what I deserve?* Are all my years of hump-and-dump casual sex finally catching up to me in some kind of karmic retribution?

Keeping a straight face, she nods without hesitation. “Super weird. And it kinda smells. And,” she points to the glass bottle wedged into the couch, propped up by my thigh, “the last time you drank anything other than Coke Zero, Red Bull, coffee, or alcohol, I’m pretty certain was six years ago—junior year. Remember when you threw up your body weight in vodka after the—”

“Homecoming mixer,” Noa mumbles as she closes her eyes and shakes her head solemnly. “Oh, man, that was a bad night.”

“I don’t remember that,” I add.

“Um, *exactly*. You used a bottle of Belvedere for a wet T-shirt contest—in which I might add, you were the only contestant. Your skin had some sort of reaction. You turned bright pink, so we dragged you home and dropped you into the tub. You were so drunk you and thirsty that—”

Addie gasps dramatically and her bright blue eyes pop like a startled lemur. “*That’s right!* The night she drank her bath water.”

The room fills with disgusted groans. I look pleadingly at Quinn. “Tell me they’re lying.”

“Just a few gulps. You chased half a bottle of vodka with half a bottle of Tuaca. What the hell did you think would happen? And you were bragging all night to...*fuck*...what was his name?” Quinn closes her eyes and taps her temples. She



rolls her wrists as she looks around the room. “That TA that used to buy Reese lunch every other day trying to get into her pants...super tall...only ever wore khakis...always smelled like baby powder.”

“Corey,” Mani says with a surefire nod.

“Yup, *Corey*.” Quinn turns her gaze to me. “You were bragging to Corey about the *incredible* head you give, so be glad bath water is the last thing you ended up drinking that night.” She raises her neatly shaped brown eyebrows at me.

*All right. Not my finest moment.* But most of my college dumbassery was an attempt to escape my thoughts about Petey. I liked to numb the pain with reckless adventures...and vodka...and Tuaca.

“Also, I don’t know if you think you’re being subtle, but whoever you’re Instagram stalking right now, I’m pretty sure you’re doing it wrong.” Mani holds out her palm. “Who are you looking for?”

I hand my phone over because Mani is queen when it comes to social media. She has over a million followers on every account she maintains, so she’s no stranger to a little Instagram media recon.

“This guy, Miles. He’s a singer. I didn’t catch his last name but he said he just got back from L.A.”

“Ah,” Mani says, “so we have that in common. What’s he look like?”

*He looks like...sexy. A contradictory mix of lumberjack and stylish.* I close my eyes, trying to narrow in on our encounter a couple of weeks ago and say, “White guy, Brunette hair, but really dark, green eyes—actually more like hazel, deep dimples, short beard now, but I get the feeling it’s new.” Opening my eyes, I see all four of my friends staring at me.

“And this is a guy *you’re* interested in?” Noa asks pulling her thick wavy hair to one side and fanning her neck. She’s the only other member of our friend group who understands my “big hair” problems. Except Noa’s Hawaiian heritage gives her

beautiful shiny waves. I'm only a quarter Puerto Rican but my hair matches Abuela's aggressively wild curls.

"Why is that surprising?"

"Because the only guy you ever got serious with looked like Drake's body double," Addie says.

"Well doesn't it make sense I'd want the opposite of Petey, then?" I snap.

That satisfies their curiosity and I am met with several heads nodding in agreement. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I asked if he wanted to meet up sometime and he pretty clearly passed."

"Then why are you looking him up?" Mani asks.

"Let's call it the curiosity of a scorned woman."

With my hands free of my phone, I take the opportunity to swipe a handful of popcorn from the bowl Noa's holding. *Ah, butter.* A nice contrast to the witch's brew of living fungus I'm trying to convince myself I like. I just...

I don't know.

Miles was *interesting*. I haven't been interested in a long time. Even if he's not into me, there's no harm in holding on to the thrill of something new a little longer, right?

Addie grumbles as she gently rearranges the massive cats who are reluctant to move. She barely manages to shuffle out of her seat to swipe the popcorn bowl. The minute she finds her seat, her cat kids reform their furry barrier around her. They are taking up an entire section of the extravagant oversized leather sectional.

At Addie's old piece of shit apartment, there wasn't enough room for all five of us to sit on the couch. One of us would normally end up squatting on her wooden floors. Her place was tiny and kind of musky, but I already miss it. I'll always remember us in that crappy run-down apartment, every Friday night, with cheap samosas from our favorite Indian restaurant, sangria, and re-runs of *Sex and the City*...feeling so *rich*.

I have the stuff that really matters.

Despite the mother who has never accepted me for who I am. Despite the father who gets me but is never around because he can't keep himself out of trouble. Despite being the only child of the most dysfunctional, toxic relationship anyone could imagine...when it comes to family—*I'm rich*. Looking around the room at Noa, Addie, Quinn, and Mani, I smile. It's because of them. My preferred family. They loved me even at my lowest. And I mean *low*.

It took a long time for me to get it past my thick hair, and my even thicker skull, Petey didn't love me anymore. Even when I left Atlanta in the middle of my sophomore year of college, I struggled to let go. I let false hope and doctored memories string me along for *years*.

That sex tape he “accidentally” sent me—that did *not* star me—is what finally woke me up. Only a cowardly, disrespectful piece of shit would tell a woman to move on that way. Petey purposely broke my heart so I'd let him go. Once I really let him go, that's when the depression consumed me. I was drowning with my eyes open, just watching the harrowing, devastating, impending doom. My friends rode in like the cavalry. They changed my sweatpants and sweatshirts while I laid basically comatose in bed. After I lost my appetite—and then ten pounds—they took turns force-feeding me. When I finally left the apartment, they cleaned me up after all my wild drunken escapades. They took turns driving me to my counseling appointments and stayed in the waiting area for the entire hour, before taking me home to crawl right back into bed.

They didn't rush me or have any expectations. They just loved me through my *low*.

Then one day, it hurt a little less. The weight of heartbreak gradually got lighter. I started to breathe again. Laugh again. Eat again. I met new guys and stopped just going through the motions and found a way to enjoy sex again.

The love part, I'm still working on. I have yet to discover if love exists outside of Petey. It's possible I've been avoiding

it because the only version of “love” I know nearly destroyed me.

“Do you guys remember me telling you about The Garage? Over on Larimer Street?”

“Where you used to sing?” Quinn asks.

“A couple of times...it’s mostly where Petey would perform, and where my dad would DJ now and then. Basically, I lived there from middle school until I left for college.”

“You know, it’s kind of weird to think you were all in Denver and didn’t know each other before we moved in together. A lot of missed opportunities,” Addie says as she strokes Felices’s furry head.

Technically, Mani and Noa were best friends since childhood. And Addie grew up just two hours South in Colorado Springs. “We found each other when we were supposed to. I don’t think you guys would’ve liked me much in high school. I was wild,” I say.

Quinn raises one brow with a budding smirk. “And you’re not, now? You’ve called me twice this month to pick your drunk ass up from the club...on a weekday evening.”

“She called me once this month too,” Addie adds.

“Not a crime,” I sass. “Don’t I get credit for not drinking and driving?”

Quinn squeezes my shoulder affectionately. “Extra credit.”

Despite what people think, the apple doesn’t always fall right next to the tree. Dad and I like to drink and party. He introduced me to the club lifestyle. The only difference is I’d rather walk my freezing ass home after slamming them back. Dad always reached for his fucking keys.

“Anyway, back to The Garage. This Miles guy is restoring it. I walked past on my lunch hour and couldn’t believe the chains around the front doors were gone.”

“Ooooh,” Mani mumbles, still scrolling through my Instagram account. “That’s what this obsession is. Nostalgia.”

“Not just nostalgia. They’re going to pawn it off to the highest bidder when they’re done. The last thing we need is another chain restaurant or convenience store. I didn’t realize how much it still meant to me until I found out it might disappear for good. Then I started thinking about who I was and how many good memories I had there before shit hit the fan with Petey. I miss that girl.” I roll my eyes. “She hated stuffy pantsuits.” I poke Quinn. “No offense.”

“I don’t take offense from the girl wearing lumberjack pajamas,” she snarks back.

“Lately, I’ve been feeling like it’s time to make a change. I’ve been wanting to get back into music. The Garage seems like a sign. I’m going to ask my dad if there’s anything he can do to save it. He might still have some connections to the rich bastards at a few major labels who want to invest.”

Again, I’m met with silence and bugged-out stares. Even Mani pauses her social media stalking plight.

Looking around the room, I watch my best friends exchange obvious glances with each other. *I hate when they do this*. Because I suck at it. I’m way too blunt and direct to know how to participate in these sneaky, subtle conversations that they’re able to have with just pointed stares and brow raises. “*What?*” I ask in exasperation when I can’t take it anymore.

Noa clears her voice. “We’ve been begging you to sing for years. We’re just surprised. Suddenly you meet this new guy at The Garage and you’re all about it? That’s...I mean, it’s great. We thought Petey just...” She trails off.

“Just what?” I press.

“Stole that side of you, Pieces,” Addie says affectionately, using her nickname for me. “Quite frankly you refusing to sing is kind of like Michael Phelps refusing to get into a pool.”

“Well, thank you,” I say, “but singing was always just a byproduct for me. I’m more talking about production or management.” The time in my life when me, Dad, and Petey were working on his debut album was the happiest, most inspired of my life. I had purpose. We made plans. I wonder if

that train can still chug without Petey on board. “I’m so sick of divorce law paperwork. I’m kind of hoping yours will be the last I prepare,” I say looking at Quinn.

Unwilling to get an annulment and have the record imply that Quinn and Cody got married in a drunken stupor, they opted for divorce. But the way she smiles every time he’s around—the way Cody looks at Quinn like she’s the only woman in the entire world, makes me think they won’t be needing that paperwork after all.

“There’s no rush on that. We’ve got to get through this fake wedding first.”

*Mhmm, “fake” wedding.*

Cody is swoon-worthy. Joel comes alive around Addie. Chase Ford is a new man with Noa. Honestly, if Mani and I can get our shit together, her prediction about us all being coupled up by our annual end-of-year girls’ trip to the lodge might actually come true.

“Found him,” Mani says, proudly handing my phone back over. “This your guy? Miles Lorren. His stage name is MiLo.”

“*Holy shit.* Yeah, that’s him. I’ve been trying to look him up for literally two weeks. How did you—” My startled eyes lock on Mani’s. “You only use your powers for good right?”

She shrugs. “Mostly. You’re all safe. That’s all you need to worry about.”

I dive headfirst into Miles’s profile. His profile is public, but he hasn’t posted anything in months. Most of his posts seem to be pictures and videos of live shows at some venue in L.A. They are all taken from what I’m assuming is the bar. He’s always giving shout-outs to other musicians.

*But where are you?*

*Please be a video of you singing.*

I switch over to his reels page. I have to scroll past about twenty videos until I see the caption, Cover—Ginuwine Mashup. *Bingo.*

“I’ll be right back,” I say starting to get up, but Mani grabs me by the elbow and yanks me back down.

“Nuh-uh. I want to hear. Put it on screen mirror,” she says as she pauses the *Sex and the City* rerun that’s playing on Money Bags’s—I mean *Joel’s*—giant-ass one-hundred-inch flat screen.

My stomach swoops with nerves. I was blown away when he sang a few lines the other week, but it was brief. There’s a possibility I simply heard what I wanted to. I *really* need this guy to be a good singer to keep the fantasy alive. I’m not quite sure if I want to find out the truth with all my friends watching.

“Fine,” I say caving. Finding Joel’s TV on my phone setting, my Instagram feed instantly pops up on the big screen and we see Miles’s handsome, beardless face. *Here we go.*

The melodic intro to “Differences” plays and I shut my eyes, far more anxious than I should be, but it only takes about fifteen seconds for the beat to drop and Miles’s voice to fill the room.

My jaw drops and garbled voices fill the room.

“*What the hell?*”

“*Whoa.*”

“*Hot damn.*”

I don’t know who is saying what...I can’t focus. I’m mesmerized. I was wrong—Miles isn’t just good, *he’s fucking phenomenal.* The melody gradually changes as the unmistakable tune of “In Those Jeans” takes over. It’s somewhere during that interlude that I realize Miles has a killer falsetto too.

“Ah! I love this song,” Addie squeals as the tempo morphs and Miles stands in the video, kicking back the stool he was sitting on. With a teasing smile on his face, he sways his hips and sings the chorus to “Pony.” It’s right around the time when he starts singing about getting nasty that I realize...

*I’m. So. Screwed.*

The music fades and Miles talks to the camera with a sheepish smile; his confident performance demeanor completely dissolves.

*“All right guys, that’s just me screwing around with our new sound system. If you want to see some real performers, come check out Vibe in downtown L.A. We’ve got the best shows and the best drinks. I’m Miles—you can find me behind the bar.”*

He salutes the camera before the video fades to black and then starts over.

I’m starting to understand why Miles isn’t finding success in L.A. He’s way too damn humble. There are people with half his talent, who are twice as loud about it. He needs a little more in the department of showmanship, that’s for sure.

“So... uh...if I sent him a message what would happen?”

Quinn cackles. “By *send him a message*, do you mean send him a nude?”

“*Shaddup*—wait. Do you think that’d work?”

Mani scrunches her face, looking puzzled. “*Work?* Since when do you have trouble getting a guy’s attention?”

I shrug. “He shared a sandwich with me, gave me his shirt, and did *not* make a move. He didn’t even ask for my number.”

“Maybe he’s married?” Noa asks.

“Doubt it.” I’ve become the queen of spotting a man who takes off his ring. I’ve met too many pathetic losers who are unfaithful to their wives. I watch for the band, but I watch for that tan line too.

“Girlfriend?” Addie asks.

“Possibly. But I don’t know. He was *sweet*. He gave me his shirt. No man who wants to keep his girlfriend gives the shirt off his back to another woman.”

Quinn says in a quick mumble, “Maybe he doesn’t want to keep his girlfriend.” She rises from the couch and swivels her finger in the air. “Who wants another round?” Enough of us



speak up that she returns with the entire bottle of sangria and the other takeout container of samosas that have gone cold. *Still good.*

“Mani,” I say as I hand her a pastry puff filled with our favorite curry filling and keep one for myself. “Since my Instagram is private, what would happen if I DM’d him?”

“He probably won’t see it. It doesn’t look like he’s posted for a while. If you actually do send him a nude, you’ll most definitely get buried in his hidden messages.”

“Hidden messages? You mean message requests?”

“No,” she says taking a little bite of the curry puff. “Hidden messages. There’s a secret folder for creeps who try to send you pictures and bait messages. I’ll show you.” She grabs my phone and navigates through my messages, my screen still mirrored on the TV.

“So, we’re implying I’m a creep?”

“Well,” she mumbles distractedly as she pecks away at my phone screen, “you’re wearing his shirt, social stalking him, and started salivating when you heard him sing, so *yeah*—creeper status.” *Ha. I wish I could argue, but fine, I’m intrigued, I’ll admit it.* “Here, see? This is your hidden folder.”

Mani opens the messages and I instantly freeze.

There are dozens of unseen messages.

But they’re not from a random person...

I tuck in my legs and rest my chin on my knees. They are all from the same account. Mani doesn’t even have to open the individual messages, the previews tell an obvious story.

**User291\_279:** *Reese, it’s Petey...*

**User291\_279:** *It’s not spam, it’s me.*

**User291\_279:** *I’m sorry, I don’t know how else...*

**User291\_279:** *Please talk to me...*

**User291\_279:** *I want to apologize...*

**User291\_279:** *Please unblock me...*

**User291\_279:** *I just want to talk...*

**User291\_279:** *I still love you...*

**User291\_279:** *I need to make this right...*

The room is quiet again as my friends wait for my reaction.

“How old are those?”

Mani scrolls to the bottom of the messages and opens them. I purposely divert my gaze from the TV. Petey is a highly addictive drug. One hit is all it'd take to relapse.

“Looks like the oldest is six months ago.”

I nod. Makes sense. I didn't respond to his messages, and he couldn't call or text, so he started sending flowers. He only has my address because, before Dad's stint in prison, we shut his bank account down. Petey's manager had to mail the royalty checks from “Depth.” I should've set up a P.O. Box—it's what we advise our clients to do maintain no contact after a gnarly divorce. I guess I should be grateful Petey wasn't foolish enough to show up at my front door. But then again—wasn't that the problem? Ever since Petey found fame, he could never go the extra mile for me. He couldn't show up for me. I wasn't worth the trouble to him.

“Can you delete all of those?” I ask Mani in a whisper, trying to hold in the swelling ache that balloons in my chest. *No. Too little, too late.*

“I'll take it off the screen, so you can read them in private. It's not our business.” Addie says, patting the couch around her and looking for the remote.

“The hell it's not,” Noa hisses. “Her breakup with Petey nearly ruined her. My *divorce* wasn't even that savage. Reese,” Noa says, looking at me pleadingly, “I can't watch you go through that again. I love you way too much.”

There's only one reason Petey's contacting me. Nobody strokes his ego quite like I used to. Nobody believed in him when he was nothing...*like I did*. He's an emotional musician.

He's probably feeling low and uninspired and wants his human comfort blanket.

*Too bad.*

*Hindsight's a bitch, isn't it?*

“Don't worry. I don't care what he has to say. Just delete them all.”

“On it,” Mani says. After a few quick clicks, my hidden message inbox is completely blank. A clean slate.

Quinn wraps her arm around me and pulls me into a side hug. She smells like my favorite perfume that I constantly steal—*ahem, borrow*—from her. “Fuck him,” she mumbles and plants a quick peck on top of my head. “I'm proud of you.”

**eight**

...

A complete gut job of two public bathrooms, a full kitchen, and a bar area would've taken me at least two months on my own. Between Dad, my brothers, and a crew of four extra hands, we got it all done in ten hours. We pushed ourselves past our limits and it was a grueling day, but now we can return the dumpsters and equipment a whole day early, cutting our rental costs in half.

I've never had to worry about the cost side of construction. When I worked for my dad in high school, I showed up, clocked my hours, then got a paycheck every two weeks. Worrying about budgets, unexpected expenses, and timelines is far more stressful. I feel like a kid playing dress up, pretending like I'm qualified to oversee the restoration of The Garage.

"Miles, come here," Dad says, his voice echoing through the empty main floor. He beckons me onto the stage where he's standing near the back curtain. Hopping up, I follow the tip of his finger and see a bunch of names carved into the wooden boards where he's standing. "Would you look at this? The Revolutionaries. Marooney. Bethell. I didn't know they all performed here."

"All types. The Garage used to host rock, rap, R&B, metal, country—all of it. The only common denominator was good music and great shows."

The Garage held a tradition for their performers. If you sold out a show, you got to carve your name on the stage. Walking the back perimeter of the stage, I see so many of my

idols. I thought for sure I'd get a chance to carve MiLo into the wood one day. But then, The Garage shut down, and of course, there was the small matter of my music career going nowhere.

"This place was something special. I always wanted to sing here," I say.

Dad looks at me as his lips twitch. "You still can."

I laugh. "Nice. It'll be the first stop of my big debut tour. I think I'll call it Pity Party. Thoughts?"

Dad's not amused. "Can't you just sing for fun? Do you honestly need millions of dollars to enjoy it?"

"I guess I never thought of it like that."

Dad bends his knees, forcing his weight on the squeaky floorboard. Taking a few steps to the left, he bounces in place again, trying to test the integrity of the weakened stage structure. "You've always been all or nothing. You know that?"

"What do you mean?" I ask still scouring the signatures. Some of the tiny ones are worn, but I find Petey's. It's easily discernible with the all-cap letters. He's a total fucking boss. What I wouldn't do to trade places with him. We grew up in the same city. We're about the same age. Our music genres basically blend. What the hell did he do differently? From what I understand, Petey went East Coast, I went West. Maybe I should've tried labels in New York or Atlanta and I'd be building my music empire too.

"Your drive sets you apart, Miles. But it holds you back too. Do you remember when you quit soccer in seventh grade?"

"Seventh grade? Seriously, Dad?" I grumble as I join him in his plight to find the ricketiest floorboards. It looks like most of the damage is in the back left corner. It's where I remember the drum sets would usually be positioned when live bands performed here. "And I hated soccer."

"No. You loved soccer. Do you remember how much I spent on that Beckham jersey? *Jesus*. We didn't have grocery

money that week because you wanted that damn jersey so bad.”

I cringe. I hate hearing stories like that from my childhood. I was blissfully unaware of how broke my parents were at times. They could barely afford our needs. Every time my brothers and I *wanted* something, they suffered. I can empathize, I’m just damn lucky I don’t have kids to feed right now.

“It was a phase.”

“You had two bad games, back-to-back. *Two* out of probably a hundred. But that’s all it took for you to quit because you thought you weren’t any good and were letting down the team. Two bad games don’t make you a bad soccer player.”

“I realize.”

He smooths his thick mustache, still dusted with debris from the demolition, with his thumb and forefinger. “*Do you?* You’re a hard worker, Miles. But if you can’t be the best, you think you’re the worst. Sometimes you have to ride out the journey—ups *and* downs. Maybe that’s why things aren’t panning out for you. If you stayed in Denver you’d have more sup—”

“Dad,” I interrupt. Pressing my palm to my forehead, I groan as I shut my eyes. “I’m not saying I love being away from you guys. I miss you all. But L.A. is in the middle of the action. If I have any chance of being seen, it’s *there*.” I say the words, but I’m not sure if I believe them. It’s a speech I’ve rehearsed for years in an attempt to justify why I stayed in L.A. trying to shove a square peg into a round hole.

He pauses. “Seen by who?”

*Fair point.* “Entity and Rain Records are both headquartered there. All their subsidiaries and agents are there. Most of this game is luck and presence.” I pause and prepare to taste the bitter words. “It’s not where I want to be. It’s where I *have* to be.”

Eyeing my dad up and down, I see he looks worn. His denim jeans are faded. His thick work boots are scuffed on the toes. His white undershirt is speckled with tiny holes from where construction debris nipped and snagged his clothing. He looks like everything I was running from when I left home at twenty.

“Agree to disagree,” he says. “But what do I know about what’s best for you? I’m just the guy who ate ramen noodles for an entire goddamn week, after working twenty hours of overtime, just to see the smile on my kid’s face when I got him that overpriced Beckham jersey he wanted for a whole year.”

“*Geez*. Guilt trip. Nice.”

Crossing the stage, he clasps his hand on my shoulder with a smirk. “Just let me know when that Pity Party tour kicks off. I’ll be happy to buy the first ticket.”

I open my mouth to respond but clamp it shut when I suddenly feel the bend in the board I’m standing on. Dad’s wide eyes meet mine as he realizes we’re fucked. It’s our combined weight on the same strip of wood, but before either of us can move—

*Snap.*

We both grunt as we plummet two feet down through the stage.

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“How’s your dad?” Sienna asks in a garbled tone through the phone. I check my service and notice my battery—five percent. *Shit.*

“He’s fine, just a sprained ankle. Your service sucks by the way.”

Breathing in the brisk night air, I relish the first break I’ve given myself today. I’m sore from all the manual labor. I was supposed to take the day off, but I settled for sleeping in. I got to The Garage at noon. I check my phone again. It’s nine in the evening. I literally haven’t drunk water, eaten, or pissed all day. I popped in my AirPods, pulled up Spotify on my phone, blasted my motivation playlist—which I’ll admit is mostly just



Drake rapping about starting at the bottom and then making it—and nine hours later, I desperately need a charger.

Me and my dad's mishap on stage could've been worse. His ankle is swollen but nothing a little ice can't fix, or so he says. I'm sporting a few scrapes and bruises to the back, but nothing to miss work over. I'm on my own today, stripping the wooden boards of the stage, one by one. I saved the signed pieces and piled them neatly in the corner. The rest of that wooden safety hazard has to go.

It's an opportunity. I have bigger plans. I always thought a catwalk into the audience would be cool. We'll get the stage completely redesigned, I just need to talk to Law first about how much wiggle room I have in the reno budget. Tearing down the stage by myself should save us a little money.

"We're in the mountains," Sienna says. "I'm surprised I have service at all."

"No worries, my phone is about to die." Grabbing my throat, I realize how parched I am. "Do you guys want me to bring home some fast food? I'm about done here."

"We're staying in Breckenridge for two more nights. Our anniversary. Remember?"

"Oh shit, that's right." *Dammit. I should've gotten them something.* "Happy Anniversary."

"Thank you. And no parties while Mom and Dad are away, okay?" Sienna snarks.

"Very funny. Hey, I don't know how to set the alarm."

"It's already set on a schedule. Don't fuck with it. Miles, I'm serious. Just make sure you use your key. If you even jiggle the front door handle or try to open a window, the automatic lasers will slice you in half."

"*Exaggeration,*" Law calls out. I didn't realize I was on speaker.

"All right, I'm going to pack up and go crash."

"Sounds good—hey what did you need by the way?" Law asks.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“You called me before Sienna jumped in,” he says.

“Oh, right. When Dad’s up and about again, we’re planning to rebuild the stage a little bigger to accommodate bigger bands. Meaning that we’re rebuilding this as a venue. I just wanted to make sure we’re on the same page. It will officially be unfit to sell as a mega Starbucks once we do this.”

He’s silent for a moment and there’s a slapping sound in the background. Eventually, I hear Sienna—who thinks she’s whispering, but *is not*—say, “Tell him.”

“It’s still too early,” Law says in a hushed tone. They bicker back and forth until I remind them that I have a front-row seat to their entire conversation.

“Guys no offense, but whatever you need to say”—I pull my phone from my ear and check the battery again and see three percent—“you gotta say it quick.”

“We might’ve found a buyer,” Sienna blurts out.

“*What?*” And what I mean is *what the fuck?* “Already?” I try and fail to control my stammering. “How is that possible? You didn’t even list it on the market.”

“A realtor contacted me and said that her client was interested in purchasing The Garage once it’s fully restored. Apparently, her client wanted the property for a while but the bank had it locked up. I made the purchase the minute it went to auction, so I guess I beat him to the punch.”

“Who’s the client?”

“I’m not sure. She said she wanted to protect his privacy —”

“Which probably means it’s a big-name celebrity!” Sienna squeals as the sound of rapid clapping is in the background.

“Why are you squealing? You don’t even know who it is.”

“She’s not excited about the celebrity. It’s the offer,” Law explains.

I check my phone again—two percent. “What are they offering?”

“Pretty much whatever we want.”

“What the hell kind of offer is that?”

“Clearly, it’s a sentimental purchase. But there’s a catch.”

Of course there is... “What’s the catch?”

“They want to buy it once it’s operating again. They probably don’t want to be bothered with the nuances of opening a new business and want to make sure it’s smooth sailing before they hand a fat check over. I can handle licenses and paperwork, but I don’t know how the hell to staff or run a music venue, so...”

“You need me.”

“Yup,” Law confirms.

“And you need me to stay in Denver?”

“I’ll hire you full-time, Miles. A generous salary.”

“You’ve already been too generous, Law. I don’t know how much more charity I can take from you.”

“If it makes you feel better, technically it’s not my investment. The buyer has agreed to reimburse staffing and the remaining renovations as long as we sign an iron-clad agreement that states we intend to sell to them and won’t accept any other offers. Everything is set up, I just need you to stay and help me get this place running.”

*Stay?* Why won’t the universe let this go? First my dad, then Law. *Geez.*

“Damn...sounds like the offer is really checking all the boxes, isn’t it?”

“Yes. This is a no-brainer. It’s only temporary. You were going to stay for a few months. Just give us a year and you can head back to L.A., or off to Atlanta, or wherever you want to go with a lot more cash in your pocket.” The clinking I hear makes me think Law is swiveling ice in his drink. They are probably in a honeymoon-style suite with a stunning electric

fireplace. I bet their private hot tub overlooks the entire snow-covered town. Breckenridge is beautiful, romantic, and way too rich for my blood. But maybe if I stop going down the path I'm on...one day I could afford something like that too.

*It's just a year...*

L.A. isn't going anywhere. It'll be ready to kick my ass again whenever I decide to head back.

“Law, I'll think about it—”

The line goes silent as my phone finally dies.

“Fuuuuck,” I grumble. I think there's a spare charger in my center console. Walking across the gravel to my Jeep, I yank on the handle and realize it's locked. Rolling my eyes, I head back to the main doors of The Garage. My heart drops when I notice the rubber door stop got swallowed underneath the heavy front door. The red rubber is flattened and is definitely not stopping any doors.

*Goddammit!* To no avail, I try the handles. *Locked.* Behind those stupid locked doors are my wallet, keys to my car, and keys to my current home.

I am so damn tired. I could start walking around downtown and knock on business doors, but it's past nine on a Sunday. Everything is closed. Even if I could find someone to lend me a charger, my only hope is calling Law and Sienna back home from their anniversary trip or calling my dad, or brothers, and asking them to drive over an hour into the city to pick up my sorry ass.

Letting my back slide against the metal of the front doors, I slump onto the ground. *Yeah, this feels about right.* Sleeping on the street was probably the next step in this downhill trajectory I call my career...

Maybe I really have had enough.

Maybe I do need help.

Maybe I should *stay*.

Hell, tonight I have no choice.

**nine**

...

**O** oooh, don't do it. Don't do it. It's borderline stalkerish.

I glance at the empty right lane, clear as crystal. I could change lanes right now, take the next turn, and just cruise on past The Garage at nine o'clock at night on a Sunday. Dad and I got to talking and I didn't even realize how late it was. I was soaking up our old tradition of daddy-daughter studio Sundays.

I love traditions. I like routines and knowing what to expect.

Friday nights are reserved for my best friends. Samosas, sangria, and pretending to watch *Sex and the City* as we all just talk over the show—by far, my favorite tradition.

Every Wednesday, I meet my mom. I really wish I could change our standing lunch date to every *other* week. An entire hour and a half with Mom is tiresome. She usually spends our quality time together nitpicking at me—my pants are too tight, my blouses are too low-cut, endless suggestions of getting a Brazilian blowout, and finally “doing something with my hair.” It's annoying, but she never schedules her court dates on Wednesday, out of respect for our tradition. I do appreciate the effort. Plus, she guilted me into spending time with her by reminding me of the enormous student loan debt she paid off on my behalf.

Sundays with my dad are still the oldest tradition. It started as a custody agreement. Mom used to only let me eat dinner with Dad on Sundays. She'd drop me off and pick me up

exactly three hours later—she didn't trust him to drive. My Dad is a kind soul and a brilliant music producer...but let's be real—he's a fucking mess.

He was pretty much drunk from when I was twelve until his first stint behind bars for drunk driving. He got out and swore he'd get sober, but it was rinse and repeat. It took him fourteen years to realize that he didn't simply like to “work with a buzz,”—*no*. Dad has a problem.

Dad's *working* on his problem.

He was all smiles tonight while he sipped on sweet, iced tea and showed me his new mixing table. He built a sound studio right in his basement, which is convenient seeing as the authorities basically obliterate your driver's license after three DUIs.

He was busy running me through all the technical logistics of his new equipment and I was busy fantasizing about popping Miles in the booth. *Goddamn*, I can't stop thinking about his voice.

He carries such a powerful and clean melody.

He clearly has great range.

His tone is sweet and flowy, but kind of grisly in the right places.

Watching the Ginuwine reel on Instagram was just the beginning. Once I had his performer name, MiLo, I hunted down an old YouTube channel called MiLo Covers, which I'm sure he thought was buried. He can credit me for about two-hundred views. Hopefully that's at least eighty cents headed his way.

*Ah, fuck it.*

I flick on my blinker and slide into the right line, just in time to make the turn.

*I'll just see if the lights are on...*

Not a big deal. It's late, no one will be there. Glancing in the back seat, Miles's shirt is washed and neatly folded. All right—a thinly veiled excuse, but an excuse, nonetheless.

Slowing my car to a near crawl, I drive past The Garage. The giant dumpsters that were here last week are gone, and the debris that was sitting by the building has been cleared. It just looks like a regular brick building, lights off and empty—

*Oh.*

Pulling into the gravel parking lot and throwing the car into park, I roll down the passenger window to get a better view. Clearly visible, thanks to the sidewalk street lamps, it's unmistakably Miles who is slumped against the front doors. His knees are tucked to his chest and his beanie is pulled down low.

*What the hell?*

*Is he...?*

*Sleeping on the sidewalk?*

“Miles?”

He lifts his head abruptly, a startled look on his face. He rubs his eyes, then blinks in my direction, trying to process who is shouting at him. I open the car door and walk slowly over to him, to give myself time to control the smile on my face. He groans miserably as he looks me up and down, his gaze landing right where my skin-tight jeans hug my hips.

“Of course,” he grumbles.

“Of course, what?”

“Oh, nothing. I just made a bet with the universe that this night couldn't get more embarrassing for me.” He gestures to me and ducks his head. “I clearly lost.”

I laugh, relieved he seems playful...and sober. You never know what to expect when you see a man sleeping on the sidewalk. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he says as he rises, using the brick wall to steady himself. Balling up his fists, he pats the outsides of his legs like he's trying to get his blood flowing. “I just locked myself out like an idiot. My keys, my wallet—” he juts his thumb over his shoulder—“everything is in there. And my phone died.”



“That’s shitty luck.”

“No kidding.” It might be a crappy night, but he’s still smiling at me like he’s happy to see me.

“Does anyone else have keys?”

“Two others. But one is in Breckenridge on his anniversary trip, and my dad is no doubt sleeping. He’s still injured from falling through the stage yesterday. I don’t want to wake him.”

“*The stage broke?*” I bury my hands in my face. “I’m sorry—I mean, first—is your dad okay?”

“Just a sprained ankle for him, and some scratches for me,” Miles says patting his back. “Nothing to stress about.” Except he winces, and then I can’t control myself.

“You fell too?” I ask and he nods in response. “It hurts? Let me see.” I swivel my finger in the air and to my great surprise he obediently turns in place. Holding my breath to control the tickle of excitement flurrying in my chest, I remind myself that at the present moment, undressing Miles is strictly business. I pull up the back of his zip-up hoodie and white undershirt to see inflamed, red scratches on the tan skin of his lower back. There’s a little bruising too.

“*Miles,*” I scold. “This looks like it’s getting infected. There’s a bunch of little splinters still in here. You need to go to a hospital—”

“No,” he says firmly. Yanking down his top, he steps away. “I don’t need a thousand-dollar hospital bill to pull some splinters out and slap some Neosporin on a scratch. I’m good. They’ll come out in a hot shower.” He smiles at me warmly. “But thanks for checking.”

*Stubborn.* Which is apparently my type.

“So, what are you going to do?” I ask, crossing my arms. “Sleep here, on the sidewalk? Do you want my phone to call someone? Or, better yet, I’ll drop you off wherever you want to go. Come on,” I say nodding toward my car. “It’s freezing.”

I take two steps and realize he’s not following me, so I backpedal. “Um, you’re going to need to get *in* the car for me

to take you somewhere,” I sass.

“I don’t have my house keys. My parents live outside of Castle Rock—it’s almost a forty-minute drive. My brothers are a little closer, but they have little kids and they’re probably sleeping. I don’t want to bother anyone. I’ll call someone in the morning.” He leans back against the door and shuts his eyes until he hears me burst out laughing. Again, he looks startled. “What?”

Holding my ribs, I manage through huffs of laughter, “You’re bat shit crazy.”

“Excuse me?” He raises his brows looking slightly perturbed.

“Look at you,” I say, pointing to where his brows are furrowing. “You *actually* think I’m going to leave you out here overnight? *Hilarious*. Get your ass in the car, Miles. I know of a hospital that has a plushy couch, costs zero dollars, and serves beer.”

He smirks. “Really?”

“Really,” I snark back.

“And where’s this impressive hospital?” he asks as he follows me to the car this time. He hustles to beat me to the driver’s door so he can open it for me. *Oh, damn. If I wasn’t weak-kneed before.*

I slide into the driver’s seat before shooting him a wink. “My place.”

He shuts the driver’s side door and I swear I hear him let out a low whistle—the kind of whistle a man lets out when he *knows* he’s walking right into a woman’s sexy trap.

**ten**

...

“**S**orry. I *know* that one hurt,” Reese says as she yanks another splinter from my flesh. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Didn’t even feel it,” I lie between gritted teeth. Holding my breath, I try to stay still as I lay, shirt-off, stomach-down, on Reese’s leather loveseat as she doctors up my wounds.

It’s fascinating how the contents of a woman’s bathroom can double as a mini emergency room. Reese brought out three sets of tweezers, all in different sizes, two different types of salves that do God knows what, a tabletop mirror with a fluorescent ring of light, cotton pads, cotton balls, Q-tips, and enough isopropyl alcohol and witch hazel to sterilize everything. I asked her why she has jumbo gallons of antiseptic and apparently, she does her own nails and waxing, but I can’t for the life of me understand why someone would need so much alcohol to do all that.

“Macho,” she mutters and I feel her breath against my bare skin. I can control my fidgeting, but there’s nothing I can do about the goosebumps.

“I’m not trying to—”

“No, no,” she interrupts. “That was a compliment. I like a macho guy.” She lets out a little laugh. “I’m almost done, there’s only one more splinter I can see, but I’ll have to really dig in there. It’s *deep*.”

Without thinking, the words fall off my lips. “It’s fine. I can take it deep.” Shifting my head to the side, I look at her

teasing expression. Her lips are smashed together as she tries to hold in her laugh. I chuckle at our shared lack of maturity. “Go ahead, laugh.”

“Nope,” she chirps, rising from where she’s kneeling, “that’s low-hanging fruit. I’ll save it for something a bit more clever. But just so we’re clear...that’s what she said.”

I laugh. “Fair enough.”

Holding her hands overhead, she stretches. I immediately feel guilty. She’s been kneeling on the floor, hovering over me, as I’ve been laying on her plush couch for at least forty minutes now. She carefully removed a copious number of splinters with the kind of precision that makes me wonder why she studied law instead of medicine.

I didn’t think my scratched-up back was anything more than a nuisance, but I could literally feel the inflammation calming as Reese worked her magic and removed the wood splinters from my skin. She was right... I was probably near infection.

“Are you over it? I can take it from here.” I’m not sure if her standing is my cue to peel myself off her couch.

She places her hand on her hip and cocks her head to the side with a lofty grin. “Now how would that go, Miles?” She places the tweezers in my outstretched palm. “I actually kind of want to see it.”

There’s no way in hell I can remove a splinter near my spine with any sort of accuracy. “Sorry, you’re right. I need you.”

“Atta boy,” she says with obvious glee. “I just wanted to hear you say it.” Reese takes her tweezers back, then sets them on her coffee table before heading to her kitchen. “I need a little stretch break is all,” she calls over her shoulder. I try my best not to watch her walk away, but damn...those jeans. I’m torn between loving how they wrap around her ass and thighs, but also wanting to rip them off of her.

“Thank you, Reese. You surprised me.” *I knew you were sexy and funny. I had no idea you were so nice too.*

She returns to the couch with two bottled beers. I sit up as she hands me the drink in her left hand. Sitting to my right, she barely leaves a sliver of space between us. “Surprised you, how?” Reese asks, hiking one knee up and letting her other leg dangle off the couch.

“That you pick up men off the street and bring them home to play doctor.”

She snorts. “Only when I *really* see potential.” She takes a sip of her beer and points to my back. “Is it feeling better?”

I nod. “A lot better.”

“Good.” She takes another sip before placing the bottle on the coffee table, then sinks back to her knees. “Lay back down. One more.” I hand her my beer to sit next to hers and do as I’m instructed.

Up until this point, I’d mostly felt the cool tip of the metal tweezers, poking and prodding me, but I flinch dramatically when Reese’s entire palm presses into my lower back.

“Whoa there, boy. Calm your hooves. I haven’t even started. If I put pressure right here,” she says pushing down, “it’ll hurt less.”

I’m not squirming because it hurts. It’s her breast grazing against me as she presses her weight into her hand. It’s the uncomfortable bulge in my pants that’s beginning to grow. “Just go for it. No need to be careful.”

“You sure?”

“Mhmm,” I mumble and she immediately stabs me with the tweezers. *Holy. Shit.* It takes inhuman strength to pretend to be manly as she lunges for what I’m convinced is my spleen, not a little wooden sliver.

“Got it!” she says triumphantly. *Thank God.* “You really do have a high pain tolerance.” *All right, I’m crying on the inside, but at least she thinks I’m a man about it. Worth it.* I suddenly feel something cold and wet on my back followed by a sharp sting. This time I buck like a startled bull. “Woman! Warning please.”

“Whoops, sorry.” She giggles. “Come on, tough guy. It’s not that bad. It’s just a little antiseptic.” She smooths a large Band-Aid over my skin. “There, you big baby.” Scooting backward on the ground, so our faces are level, she smiles as she holds up the bloody splinter, she just relieved me of. I’ll admit, it’s menacingly huge.

“I’ve heard stories about rogue splinters traveling all the way to your heart, slowly poisoning you before it wrecks shop in your vital organs.”

Her plump, pale pink lips are so close...

*Too close...*

“That’s shrapnel, Reese. Not splinters.” I immediately sit up, freeing myself of the momentary spell she had me under.

She disposes of the splinter in the kitchen trash and then returns to hover over me. She has an expectant smile on her face as she touches her earlobe with the pad of her thumb. “It’s late.”

“Past midnight,” I add.

“You must be tired.”

I shrug. “It’s been a long day. I’m ready to turn in if you are.”

Reese gives me a pointed stare as she yanks out the band around her ponytail. She shakes her head a little, letting her blonde curls fall over her shoulders. “This is a one-bedroom apartment.”

“Oh,” I say. “I’m fine on the couch.” She scrunches her face. We both know I can’t sleep comfortably on this two-cushion loveseat. My neck and my back are already aching from when my legs were dangling over the armrest while Reese played sexy nurse for an hour. She’s got a stiff-looking turquoise chair in the corner that looks even more uncomfortable. “Or the floor.”

“Miles, I have a King-sized bed. Can we please just be mature adults about this? We’ll sleep in the same bed and

build a barrier with my stuffed animals and fuzzy pink throw pillows.”

I snort in laughter. A comfortable bed sounds so inviting at the moment...even outside of the sexy blonde that has been sending *clear* signs that she'd like to—how do I put this delicately?—get *dicked down*.

“Thank you, for everything. You saved my ass tonight. You're a sweetheart,” I say.

“A word that has literally never been said about me before,” she says as her hand finds her hip. I like that snarky, sassy smile she always seems to be wearing.

“I'm serious, *cool girl*. I see right through you. You're nice.”

She winks. “I'm nice to the nice ones.”

We both pause for a moment, caught up in the tempting energy between us. If I'd met her in L.A. even two months ago, we'd already be on round two. The scratches on my back would be from her nails, not construction work. I'd run through my entire stockpile of condoms on a girl like Reese, but...

She's not just a fucking firecracker looks-wise...

She likes the music I like.

She's been making me laugh all night.

Reese scooped me up off the side of the street, fed me, doctored me up, and somehow didn't make me feel like a pathetic loser in the process. I don't want to treat her like she's easy. I can't offer her anything. I'm not even sure if I'll be here in a few weeks. She's not the kind of girl I want to play the hit it and quit it game with.

“Would you mind if I took a shower?”

She raises her eyebrows in surprise and I know what's on her mind. “Sure?” It comes out as a question.

“You probably have nice sheets and I've been sweating in a grimy building all day. I want to rinse off at least.”



“Follow me.” Reese leads me down the short hallway to her bedroom. Opening the door, my jaw drops. The entire back wall of her bedroom is lined with three giant media racks—filled with hundreds—no, that’s got to be at least a thousand CDs.

“*Goddamn*, Reese.” I make myself right at home and admire the racks up close. I chuckle as I pull out a few CDs from their neat individual compartments and realize I own most of these too. I certainly don’t have a collection like this. “What do you do with all these? Do you seriously own a CD player?”

“Um, hell yes,” she responds with wide sparkling eyes. “I listen to iTunes, Pandora, and Spotify like everyone else. These are just...memories I couldn’t get rid of. I miss the days of CDs.” She points to the top row. “Nineties.” She gestures to the middle three rows. “2000 to about 2012.” She squats down and slides her finger across the row of the most colorful-looking CDs. “All my mixtapes,” she says as she narrows her eyes at me. “Don’t worry—all burned legally. iTunes now owns what should’ve been the start of my 401k.” She points down to the row at the bottom. “And Usher.”

I squint at her. “What? There are at least fifty CDs down there. That can’t all be Usher.”

“Every studio album, single, bonus track, compilation, collabs, my mixtapes, and basically every song he’s ever been featured on—it adds up to about seventy or so.”

I turn my head and lock on her eyes. Her cheeks flush a little. I think it’s the first time I’ve seen Reese Reyes just a tad embarrassed. “Stalker,” I say with a pretend horrified expression.

She draws in a deep breath. “Yeeaaah...I might have a little problem.”

“Where’s the shrine?”

“Closet,” she shoots back a little too quickly. She rolls her eyes as she watches my expression turn from humorous to concerned. “Kidding.”

“Mhmm, you have a lock of his hair somewhere, don’t you?”

“Just a hat.” She pumps her brows twice. “Front row at his OMG Tour. He threw his hat into the crowd.” Reese shrugs nonchalantly. “I may have fought a bitch for it. Now it sits in the center of the shrine.”

“All right,” I mumble. “Now, I’m concerned.”

“Don’t be. You can’t clone shit from a hat. I promise. I’ve asked around.”

I snort again. “Outside of the obvious, why Usher? Why doesn’t Ginuwine get a row?” I ask pointing to the wall of CDs.

“*Outside of the obvious,*” she says in a mocking tone, “it’s not a crush situation. I just like his range. I listen to Usher when I’m sad, when I’m angry, when I feel like partying, and when I’m *in the mood*. It’s like having a friend through all the stages. Great music provokes emotion—good and bad. Usually, when I’m making a mix, it takes several different artists and genres to compose a complete emotional thought for me. But Usher does it all, on his own.” She pats the side of the rack. “So, he gets his own row.”

“That’s...” *Beautiful. Insightful. Sexy. Charming. You are going to fucking ruin me, Reese.* “Pretty cool.”

“Bathroom’s that way.” She points to the door on the other side of the room. “There are clean towels under the sink. Please feel free to use my soap, shampoo, whatever you like.”

“Thank you,” I say turning toward the door.

“Oh!” she yelps and I turn around to face her wide grin. “Because I know you’ll have questions, the turquoise silicon thing on the shower rack is indeed my vibrator. Don’t bother trying to use it, the battery is dead.”

I peer at her, my mouth gaping. “What would I—” *Stop.* “Why would you think—” *Stop again.* “Use your—” I run my hand through my hair. “You know, you could’ve snuck in there and hid it and I’d be none the wiser.” *I know you’re trying to*

*tempt me.* It will be a miracle if I make it out of this apartment in the morning without begging Reese to ride my face.

“Oh, you’re misunderstanding.” She purses her lips. “I’m not embarrassed. I was just warning you. The last dude who used my shower thought it was something else and it was a little awkward to explain after he’d already used it to massage his sore neck.” She bursts into a laugh.

“You really just say whatever’s on your mind, don’t you?”

Her expression sobers for a moment—all humor wiped clean in an instant. “Most of the time,” she mutters under her breath. I let the air fall silent between us as I study yet another new expression. She’s smart, sassy, funny, sexy...but what is *this*? Sad? A little haunted?

Getting to know this girl is going to take some time. It’s probably something I need to stick around for.

“All right,” I say nodding over my shoulder to the bathroom door. “Well, I’ll make it quick.”

“I’ll get started on that pillow barrier,” she says, wiggling her nose. I glance at the plethora of throw pillows, in every shade of pink, on the neatly made bed. There are so many you can barely see her comforter, and yet I find myself thinking...

*They still won’t be enough.*

---

## reese

I didn't actually build a pillow wall on the bed. All I want between Miles and me tonight...is sweat. He's going to want to write a song about what I plan to do to him. I might even have to call in sick to work tomorrow because if this man fucks like he sings, I'm probably going to need all damn day to sleep it off.

The faint squeak of my shower handle—that I need to call building maintenance to repair—tells me Miles is done showering. True to his word, he kept it quick. *Good*. I've been holding my breath for the past two hours he's been here in anticipation. I was ready to jump his bones a couple weeks ago when we first met. Now, I'm nearly delusional with what can only be described as primitive lust. I refuse to be called out for it. There's nothing wrong with a woman who has a healthy sex drive.

He opens the door and pokes his head through. His hair has a slight curl when it's wet. "May I borrow a little of your toothpaste and mouthwash?"

"Of course."

He disappears behind the door again. *Good call*. Rummaging through my nightstand, I find an old pack of Listerine breath strips and help myself to two. They've barely dissolved on my tongue by the time he exits my bathroom, smelling like my citrus body wash. He's turned his boxers inside out but is shirtless. He laughs when I cover my eyes with my hand, but then split my fingers, very obviously checking him out.

"Wow," I say unapologetically as I scour his broad chest and tight abs like I'm a lioness and he's my dinner. I count in a mumble while he laughs at me. "There really are six of them. *Good for you.*"

He points to the pile of pillows on the floor. “I see you made no progress.”

I teeter my head from side to side as I pull back the covers to show him my pajamas are low-cut cheeky panties and a thin white tank top—no bra. “The more I considered it, they’d just be in our way.”

His eyes fall to my chest, and he sucks in a deep breath and then groans miserably. He sits down next to me on the edge of the bed, but the way his body seems stiff and on guard, I have a feeling this isn’t going to go the way I want.

“Reese, I’ve only met you twice—”

“Accurate,” I reply.

“I already like you.”

“Cool story. Same here.” I place my hand on his bare thigh.

“So, um...it turns out I might be staying in town a little longer than I thought.”

“Really?” I can’t hide the intrigue in my voice.

“Yeah. I wanted to take you up on your offer to meet up again when we first met, but I didn’t want to lead you on because I wasn’t planning on staying in Denver. But I um... *very recently* decided to stick around, so,” he catches my hand that’s sliding up a little closer to his crotch, “I’d like to do this the right way. Can I take you out first?”

“*Ugh.*” I snap my fingers in his face. “Snap out of it, Miles. Don’t go all gentleman on me. I’m not a girl that needs to be wined and dined. Sex is just not that big of a deal to me.”

His eyes narrow slightly as he smolders—which is sending all sorts of confusing signals to my lady business. He practically growls at me, “If you think sex isn’t a big deal, you’re not doing it right. Good sex should make you crazy, obsessive, and thirsty for it at all hours of the day. It’d be a huge deal with me.”

I blink at him, thoroughly unamused. “If you don’t want to have sex right now, don’t say shit like that to me.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to. The things I *want* to do to you right now...” he says, tucking my hair behind my ears. “You wouldn’t be able to walk or think straight for days.”

“That’s a lot of talk,” I grumble as I lay back on my pillow, extremely uncomfortable. I’m pretty sure he’s shutting this down, but I have to cross my legs to control the hot swell between my thighs because clearly, they didn’t get the cease and desist memo downstairs.

Planting his hand on the mattress to support his weight, Miles hovers over me. “I have to be honest, you caught me while I’m kind of down and out.”

“Meaning?”

He blows out a slow breath, stalling, like he’s reluctant to say what’s next. “The truth is I moved home because I couldn’t afford to live in L.A. anymore. I’m living rent free in my cousin’s basement. Restoring The Garage is a pity job they gave me to help me get my massive debt under control.” He looks away, but I’m still locked on his hazel eyes. “A lot of the girls I’ve met come at me because they think they’re getting in on the ground level of fame. I’m not sure if I’ll ever get there. I want to be clear that dating me involves ramen noodles and whatever is free to stream on Netflix. Are you honestly into that?”

The sad look on his face instantly kills my libido. Not because his sexy toned abs and broad back with all the smooth, defined muscles are any less enticing, it’s because I just want to focus on making him feel better. The music industry is war, and I’m starting to think Miles was a casualty.

Maybe we don’t need to hook up right now.

Maybe we just need something different...

“I’m into it, Miles. I’m partial to beef.”

He screws up his face, confused by my response. “What?”

“Ramen noodles,” I clarify. “I know most people like the chicken flavor, but I think it’s gross. I’m a beef-flavor kind of girl. With a little splash of sriracha. Hits the spot.”

He smiles and moves his hand so I'm not trapped under the barrier of his arm. "I'm not trying to turn you down or anything. Actually, I feel like someone should give me a fucking gold medal for resisting you at the moment." His eyes trail up and down my body. "I just figured maybe it's a good time to try something new when it comes to dating."

"And by that you mean you want to know my middle name, my favorite color, and what I like to read before you slide it in?"

"Slide it in? *Good grief.* You're something else." He laughs. "But yeah, pretty much. Are you mad?"

"No." Perhaps it's time I try this differently too. "As I said, I'm into it." I pat the bed next to me. "So, no sex tonight, but where'd we land on spooning?"

With a wide grin, he acrobatically maneuvers over me and finds the empty side of the bed. Grabbing me by my hips, he pulls me down and into his body so his bare chest lines my back.

"Careful, there buddy." I flinch as I feel his growing hard-on press into my lower back. "I'm dicklish."

His laugh is breathy in my ear. "As in dick ticklish?"

"As in if you keep poking me like that, there are things I can do right now to make you change your mind about waiting."

Reaching around, he grabs both of my hands in one of his, pinning them with ease. "Hands to yourself, missy."

"Don't need my hands for what I was thinking."

"Go to sleep, Reese." He groans in agony as he releases my hands and his arm nestles into the dip of my waist. "Sweet dreams." Miles kisses the back of my head tenderly.

*Ahhh.*

*Like I said—I'm so screwed.*

The tingles are near unbearable as my curves meld into the wall of his chest and abs. My hips lock into his. I'm instantly

warm—too warm. I don't bother pulling the blanket on top of us. Breathing in my hair, he moans in appreciation. "This is nice by the way. I would've never pegged you for a cuddler," he says into my ear.

"I used to be."

*A long time ago.*



**eleven**

...

Mani swivels her fork in her pasta dish creating a bite so big that she'll need to unhinge her jaw to fit it in her mouth.

"Hungry?" I ask with one eyebrow raised.

"It's the hormones," she mumbles, stuffing the pasta in her mouth. "I can eat this entire plate and it still won't be enough. Real talk—am I getting fat? I can't even tell anymore."

"*Ah*," I shriek with a pretend horrified expression. "Since when do we say the f-word at the table? But no, you're not. And even if you were, that's just more Mani to love. Eat up."

She rolls her eyes and huffs to convey her extra-irritability today. I'm so glad Mani's finally moved back home, and most days she's her normal self, but today is a Dragon Day, as Quinn, Noa, Addie and I have dubbed them—behind Mani's back.

Quinn's office is right down the block and she might've been better company for this lunch. Except, I tried that once and my mom could not behave herself. Quinn's late mother, Sav, and my mom were good friends. Quinn is still grieving in her own way. My mom, however, likes to talk about Sav in front of her daughter like she didn't die tragically in a car crash. She thinks that dredging up fond memories is somehow honoring her friend, but Quinn's not ready. The last weekly lunch with my mother I dragged Quinn to I swear, she nearly left in tears when Big-Mouth told her she was the tan, spitting image of her mama. It takes a lot to cause Quinn to falter but

shoving her deceased mother down her throat for an hour straight is enough to break anyone.

“How much longer are you on the hormones?” I ask Mani. She’s been pretty tight-lipped about her medical conditions for the past almost year. All I know is that her lady equipment is “failing”—her words, not mine—and she’s trying to sort it out.

Mani’s bright green eyes sink to half-moons as she drops her fork. “I’m not taking anything anymore. They just linger in your system. I gave up a while ago.”

“On what?”

Mani folds her hands together and taps her lips. “I’ll tell you guys when I’m ready. I just don’t know what to say yet. Is that okay?”

I nod. “With me, yes, but I’m not exactly the smothering type. If you tell me you’re okay,” I duck my head to find her eyes, “I believe you.”

“Thank you. Can you convince Noa to follow suit?”

*Ha.* Nono can be a little pushy with her care and concern. “How’s home life?”

Noa is living at the *estate* her fiancé purchased for their sweet little blended family. Mani’s bunking in one of their guest houses until she figures out her next move, but from what I can tell, she’s still pretty paralyzed. I’m not sure what happened in L.A. but it changed her. The hormones changed her. This mystery guy who she won’t talk about *changed her*.

“Crowded.”

“I’m sorry, is the McMansion on God knows how many acres of land *crowded*?”

Mani taps her temple. “Mentally.”

I take a small sip of my mimosa then rotate my finger, framing Mani’s face in the air. “This look that you’re wearing...I wore it for a year straight. Did this mystery guy you won’t tell us about...” Trailing off, I lift my eyes in question, hoping she’ll fill in the blank.

“What? Hurt me?” Mani asks.

I lean into the table, my elbows dragging across the wood. “I was going to say cheat on you, but Mani—did he *hurt you*?” I ask in a hiss. “Are all these up and down emotions a trauma response? I see it all the time in our domestic abuse cases at the—”

Holding out her palms, she scoffs. “No, no,” she says shaking her head. “Nothing like that. It’s just... I left something in L.A. I can’t get back and I need a little time to process. I’m honestly okay. I simply don’t want to talk about it yet.” Her head drops as she studies her scampi dish.

“Okay.” I return to my primavera stuffed chicken, but as I pop a bite of the warm, juicy chicken in my mouth, I feel uncomfortable. This isn’t my Mani today with her colorless flat lips and her sunken-in cheeks. I try to change the topic. “So, Miles slept over last night.”

*There it is. Pop.* Her eyes light right back up. “Nice. You reached out to him?”

“I drove by The Garage and the poor sucker locked his keys and wallet inside the building. His phone was dead, so I brought him home with me.”

“Aww, like a stray puppy,” Mani teases. “Did you throw him a bone?”

I roll my eyes. “*Wow.* That’s just bad.”

She snorts. “Sorry, had to. How was he?”

“Cuddly.”

Her brows cinch in confusion. “Cuddly as in he wanted to kiss you while he was coming?”

I laugh so loud a few people dining nearby our table shoot me a dirty look. I don’t know why Mom always picks these quiet, upscale fancy lunch locations for our weekly get-togethers. I feel so out of place here. I feel out of place anywhere they dress the tables in floor-length white linens and insist on setting a napkin in my lap.

“No—as in we didn’t have sex. We just cuddled in bed.”

“Oh boy,” she mumbles. “How’d he take it when you dumped his ass?”

I shrug innocently. “I didn’t. I’m going with the flow. He said he wants to get to know each other first. He got up the next morning and made me coffee and kissed me goodbye—*on the cheek*. He’s going to plan a really nice first date. It was cute. Definitely a refreshing change of pace from my typical interactions with men.”

“I’m not going to cause trouble,” Mani says with a serious expression. “I will tell you all of Earth’s secrets while safeguarding yours.”

“What the hell kind of response is that?”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking to you,” she says as she swivels her fork furiously once more against the bottom of her pasta dish. “I was speaking to the aliens that have kidnapped Reese and are currently using her hollowed shell as a vessel.”

“Ha. Ha,” I respond with zero amusement.

“You slept in the same bed and he didn’t make a move? I’m just saying—that kind of screams small penis to me,” she singsongs before she inserts another giant pile of pasta in her mouth.

“I’m not worried. I’ve had great sex with guys who have small penises.” Mani gives me her I’m-calling-bullshit-so-hard look, so I correct my statement. “Okay, I’ve had decent sex with one guy who had a small penis, but it was *nice* actually. He was a little lacking in the size department so he was far more eager to please via other means.” I stick my tongue out at her and she raises her glass.

“Cheers,” Mani says as I clink my own glass flute against hers. “Here’s hoping Miles has a tiny dick so you’ll get oral to your heart’s desire.”

We both break down in laughter and are once again met with disgusted stares from the stuffy-ass suits, hosting their business lunches at this uppity restaurant.

“Where’s your mom? She’s more than forty minutes late.”

Yanking my phone out of my satchel, I shoot her a text.

**Me:** We've ordered and are eating. Are you still on the way?

**Me:** Let me know if you want me to order you something...to go.

If Mom doesn't show, I won't be terribly disappointed. Lunch with Mani is far more entertaining than my mother once again reminding me I can retake the LSATs if I want to attempt a decent score. My true aptitude for standardized testing is a secret I'll take to my grave.

"It's weird," I mumble. "She was the one adamant about switching Wednesday to Monday this week because she had something oh-so-important to tell me that couldn't wait. It's why I dragged you along."

"Emotional support?" Mani asks.

"A diversion, in case I need to slip out the back."

Mani's jaw drops. "A scenario in which you'd ditch me with your stick-up-the-ass mother while you flee?"

I tap my nose twice telling her she's spot on, charade-style. "But anyway, she must've gotten caught up at work or something because—"

My mouth falls open when I see Mom enter the restaurant and make a beeline to the hostess stand. My expression is dramatic enough that Mani whips her head around, her red ponytail flying in the air. "Is that your *dad* with her?" she asks as she turns back around, her eyes almost as wide as mine.

"Yup."

"They look like they're together. That's weird, right?"

I force my mouth closed and swallow the pool of saliva that's collected beneath my tongue. "Yeah, Mani. It's weird. *Super. Duper. Fucking. Weird.*"

---

Mom's fidgeting. She's not usually a sheepish person. Her demeanor in a courtroom reminds me of the more gruesome scenes in *Terminator*. I think "total annihilation" would be the best way to describe her communication style. But right now, even though she's dressed to kill in a classy, feminine, gray business suit with her blonde hair smoothed back in a tidy ponytail, she's fidgety. She's flushed. For the first time in my adult life, I think she's out-drinking me.

"Whew," she says, patting gently under her light eyes as if she can feel the pink blotchy patches. "Those go right to your head. Good thing I'm off early today." She chuckles nervously as she swivels her empty champagne flute against the table.

"Would you like to order your *fourth* mimosa, Mom?" I blink at her with the flattest expression possible, daring her to be the world's biggest hypocrite. She hates when I drink during the day and also believes brunch was created by walk-of-shamers as an excuse to normalize waking up late and binge-drinking before noon.

"Oh, no. Probably best I get some food in me. What did you order?" She eyes my half-empty plate. "That looks good."

"Chicken Primavera. Mani got the shrimp scampi." Not that you can tell, her plate is basically licked clean. "It was good, right?" I look at my friend who is wearing the most amused smile.

"Delicious," she says enthusiastically and gives my mom and dad—who are seated way too close on the other side of the table—a genuine smile. "Highly recommend. Hey, Reese?"

"What?"

"Check your phone, I thought I heard it buzz."

I squint at her. "So?"

She narrows her eyes dangerously. "It could be work," she hisses.

Rolling my eyes, I do as she requests and pull my phone out of my hunter-green suede Kate Spade handbag. It's one of the few handbags I purchased on my own and did not steal—

*borrow*—from Quinn. Looking at my phone, I have two messages.

**Miles:** Can hardly focus on work today. So distracted thinking about you.

**Mani:** Would you fix your face? You look constipated. These are your parents for fuck's sake.

Lifting my eyes from the screen, I glare at Mani.

“Who was it?” she asks innocently, cocking her head to the side and flashing me a toothy shit-eating grin.

“Someone cute and then someone annoying.” But I take a deep breath and blow it out. *Be nice. These are your parents.* Yeah, it's not abnormal at all that sworn enemies are suddenly playing footsie under the table.

“I can't decide.” Mom sets her large menu on the table and looks to her right. She instantly returns Dad's soft, sweet smile. “What sounds good to you? Do you want to order two dishes and share?”

*Share? Okay, enough!*

“What in the actual fu—”

“Ahem!” Mani interrupts me with obvious, bulging eyes. “Ms. Bennett, want to head to the bar with me? I was hoping to get your private advice on a legal matter.”

“Real subtle, Amani.” Mom rolls her eyes. “But, sure. And for the thousandth time, please call me Robin. You're making me feel old.”

Letting my friend lead, Mom follows Mani to the large bar at the far side of the restaurant.

“What the *fuck?*” I finish asking as soon as they are out of earshot and it's Dad and me alone at the quaint, cloth-covered table.

He sips from his glass of iced tea and pretends my reaction is unwarranted. “What the fuck, *what?* That I'm sleeping with your mother?”



“*Dad!*” It’s probably worth noting that I get my forwardness from my dad. He taught me to ignore appropriate social etiquette. But not even I can ignore how gross this all is.

“Sorry, that was crass. I meant,” rolling his eyes with a smirk on his face, he raises his fingers, making air quotes, “*making love.*”

“Dude. *Yuck.*”

He chuckles at my discomfort. “Reese, what’s the issue? Aren’t most kids happy when their parents get back together?”

I lean into the table and lower my voice. “*Back together?* There is no *back*. You guys were never together.”

He raises his thick, dark eyebrows. “I mean...we were together long enough to make you.”

“When you were teenagers! You literally told me not three months ago that Mom was Cruella without the fashion sense.”

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t say that,” he mumbles before taking another sip from his glass. Grabbing a lemon wedge from the small saucer on the table, he spritzes his drink with citrus.

“Oh, yes, you did. I remember distinctly because you said you bet in her spare time she tortures puppies for shits and giggles.”

Dad presses his lips together, trying to control his smile. “Pretty sure I didn’t say that.”

“Regardless,” I say as I point at his chest. “It’s you”—I point between my collar bones—“and me in the cool kids’ club. Mom is...is...”

Dad’s face grows serious. His eyes turn down in the corners like he’s wary. “Supportive? Forgiving? Driving me to all my AA meetings? Keeping me company even at my lowest of lows?”

I take in a panoramic visual of the elegant restaurant, with waiters who drape neatly folded cloths over their forearms as they fill crystal glasses with sparkling water. Dad and I hate places like this. We’d rather be in smoky, hazy clubs that serve

stale fries and cheap tacos with music bumping so loud that our heartbeats sync right up to the 808s. Mom fits right in here, though.

“Since when?”

“It’s been about a month,” he says in a hurry. “Look, Reese, your mom wants to connect with you. She doesn’t know how. That’s why we started talking again in the first place. She’s...*jealous*...you and I can talk so easily.”

“Because you and I are like-minded,” I insist.

“You’re a lot like her too. You’re smart, witty, quick with a snarky-as-all-hell reply.” He briefly widens his eyes. “My favorite parts of you come from your mama. Even your voice. Your mom used to sing a bit back in the day.”

I scoff so hard my throat catches. “Mom hates everything about music. Look how much hell she gave you when you were knee-deep in it all.”

Dad’s elbows land on the table, and he folds his hands together in front of his face. The edge of his sleeve tattoo that travels all the way to his thumb knuckle is in clear sight. It’s my name and birthday. Dad always said he wanted a constant reminder of the most important girl in his life when he was working on the keyboard—which while I was growing up, was constantly.

“Your mom didn’t hate music. She hated my drinking. My partying. All the loose women who used to follow me and my musicians around.” He takes another long swig from his glass. “I get I was the fun parent, but your mom was the actual parent. And you punish her for it. I should’ve been better for you. A little time off the booze and I see that now. When I finally apologized to your mom for years of dragging you and her through the instability of my life, she became”—he shoots me a wink—“a little less like Cruella.”

I want to say he’s wrong, but my guilty heart pounds loudly. I’m not cold to Mom...just short, maybe? I do keep her at arm’s length, but it’s also because she only approves of one

version of me. It happens to be the version of myself that I like less and less lately.

“I swear if this lunch is to tell me I’m getting a little brother or sister—”

“Oh, *come on*,” Dad groans. “We’re in our mid-forties. We’re not trying to make more babies. You were a handful enough.” He taps his short sideburns. “See this gray?” Pointing right at me he says, “All because of your sneaking out in high school, kid.”

I scrunch up my face. “Oh, please. There are maybe two gray hairs there. Plus, I was sneaking out to go to *your* shows.”

Dad laughs as he clutches his chest. “Your mom seriously should’ve shot me. *Fuck*, I was a bad dad.”

*Stop.*

*Don’t say that.*

*You weren’t a good parent...but you were always a good friend.*

“Hey, so guess what?” I unsubtly change the conversation.

“What?”

“They are restoring The Garage. It’s opening back up in a couple months.”

I love the wide smile that spreads across his tan face. “*Really?* Man, you loved that place when you were growing up.”

“I know,” I say proudly as if Miles’s project is my own. “My friend Miles is working on the restoration and he just told me he’s going to see it through the grand reopening in a couple of months.”

“Damn, that’s cool. I’m glad to hear that. The Garage has history.” *You’re telling me.* “You know what? Does your friend want some loudspeakers? Actually, I have an entire PA system, untouched, in storage. Perks from my producing days. It’s more than adequate for a venue that size—worth *a lot*.”

“Yeah? How much are you selling it for?”

Dad shakes his head and shrugs. “It’s for your friend, right? On the house. I’m not using it for anything and I owe The Garage my career anyway.”

“Seriously? That’s amazing. Thank you.”

Dad nods. “Yeah, on one condition.”

*Of course, there’s a condition.* “What?”

“Play nice with your mom, Reese. She loves you. She wants a *real* relationship with you.” I follow Dad’s gaze to the bar where my mom is sipping another mimosa and nodding along animatedly as Mani talks with her hands.

I tap my knuckle against my lips in contemplation and then pull out my phone before I can change my mind. “Let me see if he needs it.”

**Me:** I have something for you.

**Miles:** I’m intrigued.

**Me:** It’s not a blow job.

**Miles:** I’m less intrigued.

I snort at his response and tuck my phone underneath the table like I’m texting in class, so there’s no way Dad can catch a glimpse of my flirty conversation.

**Me:** Ha! Say the word and I’ll be there in a heartbeat. It’d be the best three minutes of your life.

**Miles:** Stop tempting me. I want to take you out first.

**Miles:** Wait, only three minutes?

**Me:** \*smirk emoji\* That’s all it takes when I do it.

**Miles:** Seriously. Stop.

**Miles:** What do you have for me?

**Me:** Do you have a PA system and speakers for The Garage?

**Miles:** Not yet. I need to start looking but the upfront budget is tight.

**Me:** I got you. Free. \*blow kiss emoji\*

**Miles:** Thank you. But aren't you tired?

**Me:** Of what?

**Miles:** Saving my ass.

**Me:** Nope. Just getting started. \*kissy face emoji\*

“So?” Dad asks, his brows raised. “He wants them?” I nod. “And you’ll put in a *real* effort with your mom?” He lowers his voice as we both notice Mom and Mani grabbing their half-finished drinks from the bar and heading back to our table.

“Fine.” My chest rises and falls as I let out a dramatic breath.

*But these better be some really fucking good speakers.*

**twelve**

...

“Damn, Miles. Do you even sleep?” Law asks, looking around The Garage. I’ll admit it, I’m proud. We’re making fast progress. And to answer Law’s question—no, I barely sleep. The faster this place is up and running, the closer I am to a steady paycheck and getting my life in order.

“It’s coming along.”

Dad was only out for two days, giving his sprained ankle time to heal. He sprung right back, with a bigger crew, and now the bathroom and kitchen renovation is nearly complete. It’s a madhouse in here.

“What’s left to do?”

“Not too much.” I knock on the frame of the new bar that is at least fifteen feet long. “This needs to be topped. I was thinking we’d go with a concrete finish to keep it industrial looking. The floors are good to go, they just need to be resealed. The new stage plans are underway, but I told Sienna I’d let her do a walk through before I make any design decisions.” Sienna has graciously offered her interior design eye for The Garage. Everyone seems to want to get involved. After all these years, this place is still bringing people together.

“Are we ready to pick an opening date?”

I shrug as I yank off my beanie and fan my damp hair. The weather in Colorado is starting to warm up in mid-April, and now that we got the insulation issue fixed, it’s no longer an ice box in here. “I think we’d be ready to go by the end of

summer. The building will be ready sooner, but I have to start booking performances.”

“That’s fine. Way sooner than I expected.” Law crosses his arms as his eyes shift back and forth. I know he’s mentally crunching numbers when he has that perplexed expression on his face. “We just need to talk staffing now.”

I nod in agreement. “We need a chef and a small staff. A DJ who can work a PA system. Security. I can hop behind the bar.”

“I have a client of mine who runs a ridiculously successful food truck. It’s unbelievable. The guy drives around an obnoxiously big, blue truck with a giant dancing taco on the top and he’s a millionaire.”

“Tacos?” I ask.

“Street tacos. Street food in general. He makes these fire chili fries—they’re delicious. Worth every single minute of the raging heartburn you’ll get afterward.”

I chuckle. “Okay, so he’ll park his truck out front?”

“No, he’s willing to plan the menu here and train the staff. Apparently, he used to catch shows here too when he was growing up. When I mentioned I’d invested in The Garage, he was eager to get involved.”

“Nice. That just leaves security and a DJ.”

“And a couple of bartenders.” Law raises his brows at me. “I don’t want you behind the bar. You’re my venue manager. You won’t have time to be pouring drinks all night. This is a big boy job, okay?”

I scowl at his patronizing tone. “Do you have a budget in mind?”

“It’s a little tight at the moment. I’m willing to put a little more financial muscle behind the business once we know the grand opening isn’t a total flop and this buyer comes through with the first check.”

“Are we concerned?” I ask, furrowing my eyebrows.



“What do you mean?”

“Well, we’re putting in all this work for a buyer who wants the finished product, but...we’re certain this is the *right* buyer? After all this work”—I look around at the spacious main floor that actually looks welcoming now—“I don’t want to see it fall into the wrong hands.”

Law rubs his forehead. “Once we sell, it’s not our business anymore.” I shrug at his less-than-encouraging response. “But if it makes you feel better, the realtor did mention the reason they need help for the reopening is that the client doesn’t intend to keep it.”

“What? Doesn’t that just further my point?”

“They are buying it, to *gift it*. They aren’t sure how involved the new owner will want to be, which is why they need us to get the ball rolling.”

“Oh?” My eyes widen in surprise. “That’s one hell of a gift.”

“Sure is,” Law says while nodding his head. “It clearly means a lot to someone. I’m sure this place will be in good hands once we hand it over. And we get to be a part of restoring something precious to the community. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

*Yeah, that’s a cool way to look at it.* “All right, well I’ll make some calls and see who is looking for work.”

I have a few friends who are no strangers to DJing and sound systems, but I haven’t told them I’m back yet. I didn’t plan to when I was set on heading right back out of town.

“And as for your salary,” Law continues.

I shake my head fervently. “Nothing crazy, okay? You’re giving me a place to live, that’s already generous enough—”

Law holds up his hand as he rolls his eyes. “I have your direct deposit info, so I don’t need to waste the rest of my lunch hour arguing with you about it.” He pulls back the sleeve of his neat navy suit to check his watch. “I have to get

back to the office anyway, but let's start planning this grand re-opening, okay? What will bring people in?"

I nod at the empty glass shelves behind us. "A fully stocked bar and a killer performance."

Law aims his finger guns at me. He clicks his jaw as he pretends to fire. "Well, that sounds like your area of expertise. I'll leave you to it."

"Hey! Am I trespassing?"

Law and I both whip our heads around to the entry of the main hall to see the woman I've been dreaming about for the past few nights.

"Sure are," I call back as I wave her over. "Come here."

There's a little pep in her step as the click-clack of her stilettos bounces across the spacious main floor. She's carrying a bag of takeout and judging by the salty, fried smell, my favorite kettle chips are in the greasy brown bag.

"Law, this is Reese Reyes. Reese, this is my cousin, Lawrence Miller."

Reese extends her unoccupied hand. "Nice to meet you. This place is really coming along," she says while rotating her head and taking in the empty building that looks far more spacious with all the crap and debris removed.

"I was just complimenting Miles on his tireless work," Law says. He shakes her hand delicately like he doesn't want to break it. Reese can't be taller than five-foot-five, and even though she's curvy in all the right places, she's still relatively petite. Next to me, Law, and a crew of particularly burly construction workers, she looks like a fun-sized candy bar.

"I brought sustenance." She holds up the bag from Out West. "But sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I just popped by to see when you wanted us to deliver the PA system."

"It's no interruption," Law assures her. "I'm on my way back to the office anyway." He shoots me a concerned look. "What PA system?" Translated as, *what did you spend my money on?*

“It’s a sound system,” I explain. “Reese’s dad donated an entire set of tops, subwoofers, amps, and a mixing console he had in storage.”

Reese nods proudly. “I checked it out. You’ll probably need to get a stage monitor, but other than that it’s pretty complete. My dad said he’s happy to help install it. It’s top-of-the-line equipment, you’ll need a sound engineer.”

Law looks from Reese to me, then back to Reese. “Um, well first of all—thank you,” he says unsurely, “and second of all—*what?*”

Scrunching my nose at Reese, I point to Law with my thumb. “I’m pretty sure he thought we could just open Spotify and plug in our phones to a big speaker to put on a concert. He’s mostly just interested in the money side.”

“Ah,” Reese says nodding in understanding as her bouncy blonde curls dance around her face. “Well, in money terms,” she says, smiling at Law, “my dad just saved you guys about eighteen grand.”

Reese grunts in surprise as Law yanks her into an aggressive hug, suddenly not so concerned about manhandling her. “Bless you.”

She’s chuckling when he finally releases her and she can breathe again. “Bless *you*. We’re all really excited. Thank you,” she glances at me with a smile that lights my whole day up, “*both*. I didn’t think I’d ever see this place come back to life.”

Glancing between us one more time and shooting me an obvious smirk, Law wishes us both a nice lunch and leaves. The minute he’s out of sight, she grabs my hand and squeezes.

“You look nice,” she lies. I’m covered in dust, sweat, and grime, and once again she’s in one of her sexy form-fitting business get-ups. Today’s outfit of temptation is a sleeveless, knee-length, dark green business dress. I lean against the wooden frame of the bar and Reese wedges herself between my legs. “And that rancid smell is gone, so this is already shaping up to be a really nice third date.”

“Third?”

She holds up one finger. “The first sandwich we shared.” She holds up a second. “The time I saved your ass from an entire night of homelessness.” Her smile goes wicked. “And you know what they say about third dates...”

I kiss the tip of her nose. “Nice try, Reese. As enticed as I am, I’m very highly motivated.” Taking the bag from her hand, I pull her toward the backstage room, which has been emptied, cleaned, and furnished as a makeshift break room for the renovation crew.

Reese watches me unpack the bag of takeout on a flimsy, gray-speckled fold-out table. Unfolding two napkins, I spread them flat on the tabletop, making placemats for us both. I already know what she brought us before I take out the two French dip sandwiches, with only one cup of au jus.

“Highly motivated to what?”

I meet her light brown eyes with no hesitation. “To show you that you’re the kind of woman a man should put effort in for. Fucking you like it’s not a big deal is lazy. I want to work for it.”

She peers at me, her face growing serious. “Who *are* you?”

I point at the plastic seat across the table as I sit. She takes the cue and sinks into the rickety low seat. “I’m trying to build the intrigue.”

Scoffing, she snatches her sandwich from my side of the table and says, “It’s working. You constantly turning me down, is *very* intriguing,” she mutters, full of sarcasm.

Then again, I’m probably not the only man in the world who notices Reese’s obvious allure. I probably need to get to it already before it’s too late. “I am most definitely not turning you down. How about Friday night? Do you have any plans?”

“Friday night is girls’ night,” she responds before dunking her sandwich in the cup of broth. “Something you should know about me, I have a ridiculously close, borderline unhealthy reliance on my four best friends from college and

we don't miss girls' night for any man." Her smile is not remotely apologetic.

"Fair enough. Saturday night?"

"Sold." She takes a big bite of her dripping sub and then covers her mouth as she asks, "So, what do you have planned for our *epic* first date?" She swallows her bite in a hurry then pokes her tongue out teasingly.

"It's a surprise." *More accurately, I have no fucking clue yet.* "But I'm still rounding out the details."

"Do you want some advice?"

"Please."

"Don't plan anything crazy. I don't want to go to dinner at some prissy, stuck-up restaurant where they give you four different forks that do the same damn thing."

*Well, that's a problem.* My initial brainstorm for this date most definitely involved a fancy steakhouse that I cannot afford. "What do you like then?"

"To have fun. Just be yourself. Let me be myself. I know you're trying to impress me, but I already told you—I'm good with ramen noodles and Netflix on the couch. I don't want a guy who dotes on me. I just want a guy who talks to me *and* listens to me."

I nod. "I'm listening."

"Good. Then don't stress about some big gesture. Okay?" She pauses right before her sandwich touches her lips again and gives me a dangerous look. "Oh, and afterward, don't even think about trying to hold out on me."

"*Yes, ma'am.*"

I chuckle as I unwrap my own meal, wondering how the hell I found the sexiest, sweetest, sassiest woman on the planet who has a sex drive that rivals a horny teenager's.

What's even more surprising—she seems to be *really* into me.

**thirteen**

...

The first time I fell in love was seamless and smooth.

It was so easy.

It was like closing my eyes and letting sleep wash over me after an exhausting day. It was sneaky seductive. Every time Petey smiled, laughed, kissed me, or touched me, it was like pulling me into the water, just a little deeper. Before I realized what was going on, I was drowning, desperate to be the Bonnie to his Clyde.

*Miles is different.*

He's a freight train and I'm tied down on the tracks.

I'm basically begging him to run me over. I know this man is going to ruin me. Because I feel it. *It's there.* The spark...the chemistry. The little light I've been lacking for the past few years, and hot damn I didn't expect to find it *here*—with him. At this point, I kind of hope the sex is disappointing so it'll break the spell because I no longer feel like I have self-control in the matter.

“You want a drink?” Miles smiles at me from across the flimsy plastic table.

“Sure. Do you have kombucha?”

“*Really?*” he asks looking impressed as he makes his way to the mini fridge plugged in behind him.

“Yeah, your sour foot sodas are growing on me,” I say, popping a fresh kettle chip in my mouth, savoring the salty grease on my tongue. *Mmm.*

“Sour foot soda?” He laughs. “Then why’d you ask for one?”

He returns with a mason jar of the precariously tan colored liquid. “I’ve been trying to train myself to like it. Your homemade stuff is more palatable. The ones from the grocery store have—”

“So many added chemicals. My mom went through a crazy health kick my senior year of high school. She was trying to grow our own food.” Miles rolls his eyes, but he has a fond smile on his face. “Except, she had three grown sons and a husband who worked manual labor for twelve hours a day, so a garden salad with homegrown heirloom tomatoes wasn’t satisfying anyone.”

I laugh as I take a sip from the jar. This batch has a hint of lemon and honey.

He continues, “I think it hurt her feelings that we were all annoyed with her new homeopathic, organic, all-natural lifestyle, so I tried to be more supportive. We learned to make kombucha together.”

“Why is it so healthy?” I ask before taking another sip. *Am I actually starting to like this shit?*

“It’s good for digestion and maybe inflammation. I don’t know, honestly. There’s a bunch of supposed benefits—nothing proven.” He runs his hand through his frazzled hair, then trails it across his short beard. God, I love this look on him. The grungy, worn way a man looks when he works with his hands and sweats. *So sexy.* I was raised on R&B and hip-hop. I like a man with a little swagger, who’s kind of cocky, but not arrogant. The perfect specimen has Drake’s confidence, Diddy’s style, and Usher’s smile. Miles has none of that. *Yet he’s perfect.*

“But you drink it religiously anyway?”

“When I was in L.A., I’d get to the club at like seven, then bartend until three in the morning. I’d go home and sleep for about five hours before I’d wake up and take whatever temp jobs I could pick up. If I was lucky, I’d have about one hour in



between jobs, and one afternoon a week to work on my music. I couldn't poison myself with alcohol and energy drinks. I was working ridiculous hours and I needed to feel as healthy as I could. Did the kombucha help? I don't know. But I guess it reminded me of Mom when I was feeling low. I missed her a lot when I was gone. I was her youngest, so we were really close as I was growing up."

I feel a twinge of guilt. I'm not just my mom's youngest, I'm her oldest. *Her only*. We don't have any sweet memories like that.

"And here I thought you were just partying and screwing around with herds of women in L.A."

He scoffs. "*Oh, no*. No way. No time. I mean I *dated*...but I didn't *date*. You know?"

I'm way too damn direct to accept a vague response like that. "So, you were fucking around? Hm," I say as I purse my lips. "It's nice to know I'm the only girl you won't hook up with."

He tsks his tongue. "So sensitive." A tender smile spreads across his face and touches his hazel eyes. He scoots his chair back and glides around the table before squatting down next to me so our eyes are level.

He leans in...

So close I can feel his breath against my skin, causing an agonizing tingle to zip down my spine. I hold my breath as his lips near mine. *What the hell?* It's just a kiss. *I've kissed so many men*. It's not a big deal. It's just lips.

His against mine.

Mine on his.

Not a big deal...

He grabs both of my hands in his. "What's your favorite color?"

"Green."

He shakes his head a little. "More specific."

“Um...a really dark, color-rich green. Like emerald.”

There are flames in his eyes as his crooked smile spreads across one side of his face. “That’s a pretty green.”

“Mhmm,” I say swallowing the lump in my throat. I part my lips, trying to invite him even closer.

“And what’s your middle name?”

“Robin.” My head starts to swim with his face this close. “My mom’s name.”

“Triple Rs,” Miles mumbles as his gaze latches onto my mouth. “Reese Robin Reyes.”

“Yeah...”

“Mine’s Drew.”

“Miles Drew Lorren.”

“Mmmm. I like that.” *Now, kiss me already.*

He presses his lips against mine teasingly. It’s barely a peck. The warmth of his soft lips is gone as soon as it enters. Then, the jackass rises, leaving me essentially kiss-less, returning to his side of the table, picking up his sandwich, and taking a big bite like it’s nothing—as if my heart isn’t misfiring, and my brain isn’t fuzzy.

“There. Now we’re two steps closer to uh...how did you put it the other night? *Sliding it in?*”

“You’re the worst.”

He snickers and I want to slap the playful look off his face...except it’s endearing, so let’s say *softly* slap. But the way he makes me smile, I am thoroughly confident Miles is worth the wait.

Unlike Quinn, and sometimes Mani, I have no hesitance about falling in love. I want it, but I have to *feel* it. I once had a taste of love and now I can’t settle for anything less. I’ve been wanting, wishing, waiting...patiently. And if good things come to those who wait, I’m pretty confident Miles is my shot at a damn good thing.

It's probably best he's controlling the pace at the moment. I like to bulldoze through intimacy to get to the answers. I want to know who a man becomes when he has me. That's the real test. Once he gets what he wants—my attention, my heart, my body—how will he act? Am I enough? Loyalty, or lust? Are the quiet moments at home just as thrilling as the big wins on the road? Will he carry me? Will he let me carry him? *These are the questions.* And the last time I asked a man those questions...

I didn't like the answers.

"Can I confess something?" He nods once with a skeptical look on his face. "I've heard you sing."

"I know," he says, "I was there on the sidewalk."

"No, I mean I found your Instagram account."

"*Oh,*" he says, sounding a little more uncomfortable.

"The Ginuwine mashup. Your old YouTube channel. Miles..." I trail off and wait until his eyes meet mine. "You're incredible. And not in an 'oh-bless-his-heart-for-trying' kind of way. I don't like fluffy generic compliments so I won't do that to you. Specifically, your voice is rich, sultry, and artistic. You have great range and such a presence when you sing. Plus, it's been a long time since I've heard a man pull off a falsetto without a little autotune help."

"You sure know how to stroke a man's ego."

I smile and bite back my suggestive comment about what else I could be stroking. I don't want to distract myself with crude humor at the moment. "What's holding you back?"

"I've been pedaling my demo for years, Reese. All rejections. There have been a handful of different excuses, but I think the general gist is there's nothing particularly intriguing about me and my music. Apparently, I'm not marketable."

"According to who?" Leaning back in my chair, I cross my arms.

"Every major record company and their subsidiaries. I've had three different demos produced trying to create my brand.

None of the labels want a white guy trying to be the next Tank or Trey Songz. I kept getting pushed to corny boyband pop music...and I did it too. I racked up so much debt doing what these con artist producers and agents were telling me to. I figured once I made it, I'd get back my creative freedom, but it hasn't happened yet." He pops his shoulders nonchalantly, pretending like this admission doesn't hurt. "I don't know. Maybe I'm having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that it wasn't meant to be."

*Hmm, I highly doubt that.*

"The industry has changed. Getting a big record deal isn't every artist's goal anymore. You don't need gatekeepers, Miles."

His smile is a little guarded like I touched a nerve. "How do you know about all of that?" he asks playfully.

*I know.* Petey built his empire on the foundation of my support. I pushed him when he wanted to quit. I wiped his tears with my sleeves. I believed even when he didn't. "Look at Chance the Rapper. *Grammy*. Petey? Grammy and several platinum records."

"Petey's not independent."

I wink at him. "Check your math, homeboy. Petey's first album, *and his most successful*, was released as an indie record. I should know, I was there when my dad produced it. In fact, that album paid off my dad's house."

Miles widens his eyes. "Your Dad produced *Depth*? That's my favorite Petey album. It's a far cry from his stuff today. It was full of love songs."

*Because at the time, Petey was in love.*

"Yeah, it's a good album," I mumble under my breath. "But the point being, L.A. and labels shouldn't decide if you can be a singer. *You should.*" Miles gives me a small, hopeless smile. He's trying to be polite, but I see the insecurity wash over him. I should leave it alone. But I'm a pusher. It's either my worst quality or my superpower. "I could talk to my dad."

"About?"

“*You.*”

“About me—what?”

“Really?... We’re going to play this game?”

He snorts. “What game, Reese? I can’t afford a producer like your dad. The producers I worked with twisted my songs and pumped out commercialized cookie-cutter bullshit in like half a day—it still cost me a small fortune. Your Dad...*Depth*—that’s way over my head. Plus, I haven’t written anything new in a long time. I wouldn’t even be able to keep up.”

I rub my thumb and forefinger together, playing the world’s tiniest violin. Miles rolls his eyes at my sassy reaction. “Are you done? Or do you need me to keep playing this?” I hold up my tiny finger violins.

“Real cute,” he grumbles. “You’re pretty sassy, you know that?”

“I get sassier when I’m sex deprived.” We both laugh. “But seriously, just let me talk to him. From what I understand, Dad’s been eager to get back in the studio. I think a new project could be good for both of you. I mean, you’d owe him points. But when you go platinum”—I wink—“it’ll pay for itself.”

Crossing his arms, Miles leans back in his chair. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

I scrunch my face at his odd remark. “What?”

“You bring me sandwiches, rescue me from the streets, nurse me back to health—”

“Back to health?” I furrow my brows. “Dramatic, much? It was a few splinters.”

“Bottom line is you’re acting like you’re really into me. Why? You could have any guy you want. I don’t have anything to offer you.”

*All right, we’re going to have to work on your confidence if you want to be an R&B star, buddy.* Reaching over the table, I hold out my hand and he eagerly takes my fingers in his. “I’m nice to you because I like you. I have no hidden

motivation here, Miles. I don't need you to offer me anything. You're honest, sweet, talented, we have a lot in common, and I like spending time with you. Isn't that enough?" He squeezes my fingers and nods. "And also," I say, my face growing serious, "I'm trying to get in your pants."

He throws his head back as he laughs. "Fair enough." I love the way his eyes crinkle when his smile lights up his whole face.

"So, I can talk to my dad?"

He ducks his head in a reluctant nod. "Okay, but promise me you'll try to make me sound less desperate than I really am."

"Deal." I return to my sandwich and mumble between bites, "Now, that was a little easier than I expected." Looking up, I meet his eyes. "Had you resisted, I was completely prepared to offer that three-minute blow job."

Miles rolls his eyes and mutters something about playing with fire, as I giggle to myself. That's when it hits me again. The feeling of déjà vu.

A talented musician down on his luck...

A flirty conversation at The Garage...

All these zips, tingles, and butterflies...

My uncontrollable urge to insert myself and help this man believe in himself...

If this is almost an exact repeat of my courtship with Petey...does that mean the end result will be the same?

**fourteen**

...

Sedi Fields is a man of many talents. He's a professional temp. What I know about hustling—aka working three jobs on basically no sleep—I learned from my childhood best friend.

When I called him to tell him I'd been back in Denver for nearly a month, he was legitimately pissed. He very reluctantly told me he was still spinning at Blue Horn, the old eighteen-and-up nightclub we used to sneak into in high school. Sedi was the master at making fake IDs. His illegal side hustle was what funded all his mixing equipment. We're an unlikely duo, but once I listened to his beats and tracks, I became his biggest fan, and he became mine.

We had a brotherhood...that I walked out on. Rightfully so, he's still holding a grudge. I fell off the map when I moved to L.A., but he's even more upset I moved back home and didn't tell him.

I waltz into Blue Horn an hour before doors open on a Friday, of course to find Sedi behind the booth, tinkering with his equipment.

"Don't hate me," I say, holding up a bag of McDonald's. "I got your favorite. McDoubles." I hold up my empty palm in surrender.

Sedi's wearing a purple, leopard print, long-sleeve shirt that's so tight it looks like he was poured into it. The gold chains around his neck clash horribly, and his jeans are so ripped and tattered I can see more of his dark legs than denim.



To top off his ridiculous ensemble, his sunglasses are resting neatly in his Jheri Curl styled hair. It's a nightclub—*what the fuck does he need sunglasses for?*

He licks the tip of his finger and then holds it in the air like he's testing the temperature. "Weather's cold in here, bruh."

"Oh, *come on*, Sedi." I hold the bag up as an offering. I stole a move from Reese's playbook. It's becoming my favorite thing in the world when she pops up unannounced, bringing me lunch. I certainly have different intentions than Reese usually does right now—but still—it's a universally nice gesture. "I know you haven't eaten. Hear me out."

He glowers at me, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Do those have Mac sauce on 'em?"

"Extra," I assure him. "And I brought extra ketchup," I say as I pat my pants pocket where I stuffed a handful of condiment packets.

Stepping away from the booth, Sedi pauses when he's about a foot away from me. Glancing around, this place hasn't changed a bit. It's still torn up, dingy, and it looks like someone painted the walls with the color shit, but you can't see any of that with the lights off. Nor do you care when you're tipsy with a pretty girl grinding against your crotch. Sedi and I used to get into all kinds of trouble here.

"I'm sorry," I say sincerely. "I know I've been a crap friend."

"Don't be sorry. Be honest," he says, but I see a hint of his familiar smile.

I peer at him quizzically. "Honest about what?"

"Don't come walkin' back into my life, just to ditch my ass again when your come up finally pans out."

"What come up?" I ask, scoffing. "I'm working at The Garage for a reason. And I didn't ditch you, Sedi." My eyes drop to the ground. "You know me too well for me to lie to you, and it was too hard to admit I was getting my ass kicked in L.A. I'm sorry. I should've reached out."

Sedi closes the space between us and yanks me into a brotherly hug. *Damn, he reeks of weed.* McDonald's was a smart move on my part; he'll forgive me based on the munchies alone.

We grab a seat outside at the club's patio area. It's the same wire furniture they've had for over a decade now. Shockingly, the furniture seems to be holding up. For a moment, there's only silence as Sedi attacks the brown paper bag and unwraps his cheap burgers with the voraciousness of a starving bear.

He slides a wrapped burger toward me. "Want one?" he asks with his mouth full.

"No thanks." I slide it back. I'm not too high and mighty for McDonald's, I've just been feeling off all day—a little nauseous and dizzy. There's pressure lining my temples. I have to pee every five minutes. If I was a woman, I'd have taken a pregnancy test by now.

"What happened in L.A.?"

"Nothing. Just a whole lot of doors slammed in my face." I pause as the deafening roar of a car with a blown muffler barrels past us on the street. The noise isn't just annoying—it's excruciating for some reason. I press my palm against my throbbing temple. "It might've been my demos." I shrug.

"You were putting out the stuff we made?"

"No, maybe I should've though." I sink a little farther into my chair, bracing myself as it wobbles. "I paid this agent who told me—"

"*What?*" Sedi squawks. "The fuck, Miles? You shouldn't be paying agents."

"He told me he needed a small retainer to get some marketing together and prepare professional pitches to the labels."

"Bruh," Sedi says, his chewing slows and he looks me dead in the eyes. "You got hustled."

I nod. *I know. I was already ten grand in before I realized it.* “At any rate, the producers he set me up with took over. They had me making demos that would apparently suit my look. The tracks were trash—I knew it. But they told me it’d get me a deal.”

Sedi finishes one burger, balls up the wrapper, and banks a perfect shot into the open garbage can to our right. He starts on his second McDouble. “I’m sure they weren’t that bad. Your voice could salvage anything.”

“There’s a song on the demo called ‘Bubblegum Yum Yum’ if that tells you what you need to know.

“*Oh, damn.*” He tries to hide his chuckle by clearing his throat. “I’mma need to hear that so I can give you shit forever.”

I laugh. “Not a chance.”

“I should’ve just moved with you, man. I would’ve made your mixes and protected your gullible ass. When you asked me to move to L.A., I just—”

“Sedi,” I say knocking one elbow on the table. “Your mom was sick. You made the right choice. I would’ve hated myself if you left your mom when she needed you to help my sorry ass chase a fantasy.”

He nods his head. “She’s aight now, though.”

“Good. Glad to hear it. I um... I should’ve checked in more, I’m sorry—”

“Nah, we’re straight.” Sedi makes a motion with his hand like a fish swimming through water—letting me know it’s water under the bridge. “So, what are you up to now? What’s up with The Garage?”

“I’m managing it for a little while until the new owner takes over.”

Sedi purses his lips. “You think I could get in there sometime? Play some of my new stuff?”

“Ah, I can do better than that,” I say, rubbing my hands together. “You didn’t know, but this is actually a business

lunch. How much is Blue Horn paying you to spin?”

“Not enough,” he grumbles bitterly.

“What if you—”

“Yup.”

“I’m talking about full time—”

“I’m in, bruh.”

“We need someone who is well versed in the equipment. I’m thinking we have three to four live performance slots a week, and then on the other days, we can host all kinds of events—open mic nights, karaoke, parties, ladies nights. You could just take over the table whenever you wanted. Play *your* mixes. Whatever gets people in the door and having a good time.”

Sedi holds his hands in the air. “What’d I just say? I’m in.”

“You don’t even know what I can offer.”

He groans like he’s unconcerned. “I know you’ll take care of your boy. And anything is better than here.”

“All right,” I say, excited and relieved. In one day, I got a DJ and my best friend back. “I’ll set it up. Can you come by next week? I want you there when the sound equipment gets installed. We’re supposed to be up and running by the first weekend of July if I can book an opener.”

“You got it,” he says, digging in the brown paper bag for his last burger. *Damn*. For a skinny guy, he sure as hell can put them away. “I can spin here ‘till you’re ready.”

“Hey,” I ask as an idea hits me. “Do they still let you play whatever you want here?” I nod over my shoulder to the back door leading to the dance floor.

“The owners?” Sedi asks and I nod in response. “They don’t give a fuck. As long as the bar tabs are high, they don’t care what people are listening to. I’m tellin’ you, my talents here are wasted.”

“Are you working on Saturday?”

“Mhm.” He engulfs half of his third burger in one big bite. “Every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.”

*Who is clubbing on a Sunday?* “Could you run a set list for me? Just like five songs. And do you have any instrumentals I could sing to?”

Sedi finds a devious smile. “*Oooh, ho, ho*, MiLo’s got himself a girl. Who you tryna’ sing to? You find yourself a nice thick-thick redbone—”

“Sedi, do you know your vocabulary sounds like you’re using *The Carter IV* as a dictionary?”

“Am I supposed to be offended by that?” He raises one brow. “Weezy can do no wrong, feel me?”

*Good grief.* “Anyway, her name is Reese Reyes.”

“*Reyes.* See? Sounds like flavor. She cute?”

I roll my eyes. “She’s a quarter Puerto Rican, but she’s blonde and tan, and *fuck* man...” A smile I can’t control takes over my face. “She’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“Besides me, of course.”

My expression flattens as I blink at him. “Sure, Sedi. Besides you.”

“Well, you better lock her up, because with a description like that, now I’m interested.”

“I would go to prison for murdering you.”

He laughs as he crumples up the last wrapper and makes a final shot into the garbage can. Three for three. “I’m playin’. But yeah, I got instrumentals. You can serenade your heart out. Anything in particular you lookin’ for?”

“Usher.”

**fifteen**

...

“Are you going for sexy or slutty?” Quinn asks holding up two different pairs of black shoes in her massive, luxury closet.

Teetering my head back and forth, I debate my answer. “A healthy combination of the two.”

She hands me the shoes with a shorter heel. “These,” she says, eyeing me up and down, examining my admittedly revealing, little black dress. “Your dress is way too short for anything higher. We don’t want him trying to leave money on the nightstand or anything.”

“Hardi-har-har.” Grabbing the heels by the black straps, I check the label. *Of course, they’re Jimmy Choo.* “Hey, do you have anything that isn’t designer?”

Quinn’s expression flattens as she lets out an exasperated breath. “Well...don’t make me say it.”

“I’m not calling you out,” I quickly reply. Quinn is a little sensitive people think she’s a spoiled heiress. First of all, she hasn’t seen a dime of her pending fortune yet. Second of all, she’s the hardest worker I know. Wealth is an uncomfortable subject when people judge you for it. “I just mean that Miles is a little money wary. I think he’s insecure about what he can’t afford. I don’t want him to think I’m hard up for brands or anything.”

“Hard up?” Quinn scrunches her face at me. “You’re such a dude.” I shrug innocently and flash her a wide grin. “But that is seriously so sweet. I am...am...”

I blink at her, waiting for the word that's on the tip of her tongue.

"Impressed," Quinn emphasizes. "I'm *really* impressed with you."

"For what?" I run my hands through my hair, which feels foreign. I brushed it out tonight, used a blow dryer to straighten my curls, and used a curling iron to shape loose waves. No longer in ringlets, my hair falls past my rib cage.

Quinn pats the purple velvet ottoman in the center of her closet, telling me to take a seat. "Oh, goodie," I grumble. "A Quinn lecture."

"You know it," she says as she shuffles through her racks of clothes, organized by brand, color, and material. I love this closet, but it's a little *American Psycho* up in here. "When a man disrespects you and wrecks your confidence, it usually casts a shadow over your next relationship."

"I've had plenty of guys since Petey," I interject.

Quinn gives me a darting look over her shoulder. "You've had plenty of *sex* since Petey."

"Your point?"

"My point is, I'm impressed you aren't punishing Miles for Petey's mistakes. It says a lot about your character. I really hope this guy works out, Reese. *I really do*. You've paid more than your fair share when it comes to heartbreak. You deserve a good guy."

I scrunch my nose. "Thanks."

"That being said..." She returns to me with a long olive green cardigan and knee-high suede black boots. "Don't go on your first date and have him spend all night stressing about guys making gross passes at you. The kind of guy you're going to attract in this dress will make Miles want to fight them."

"Fair enough." I take the cardigan and push my arms through the sleeves. It falls at least two inches below the hem of my dress. I yank on the tall boots, covering my exposed



calves and knees. Spinning around in place, I ask her, “Better?”

“Just different,” she says. “In a good way. My diamond hoops would pair perfectly, but...” she trails off as I shake my head. “Yeah, if Jimmy Choos are off the table, so are four-thousand-dollar diamond earrings.”

“Right.”

“What time do you have to go?”

“Soon. I’m actually heading over to the Estates at Vently.”

“Miles lives in the same luxury private community as my dad?” Quinn’s brows arch in surprise. “And you’re worried about diamond earrings?”

“He lives with his cousin, who has money, apparently.”

“Why isn’t Miles coming to pick you up?”

“He called to tell me his vision was a little blurry today and he almost swerved into the curb. He might need glasses and didn’t want to risk driving until he figured it out.”

“Hm. Hope he’s okay.”

“Me too. But I’ve got a good thirty-minute drive ahead of me, so I will be on my way as soon as I get a quick spray of your perfume.”

“Ah,” Quinn exhales. “This really brings me back to college when we lived together, and you’d steal so much shit out of my room.”

“*Borrowed*,” I insist.

“Borrowed would imply I got it back.” Quinn narrows her eyes at me. I suddenly notice she’s makeup-free, wearing lounge clothes, and come to think of it, her work laptop is nowhere in sight.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Clearing out some closet space,” she says with a peculiar smile. “Cody’s moving in tomorrow.”

I widen my eyes. “Speaking of being proud of each other. Look at you, letting the Yeti slowly wedge his way into your icy heart.” I give her a glib smile.

“You guys call him the Yeti behind his back?”

“No. To his face too. He loves it.” We both laugh. There’s no other way to describe him. Cody is humongous, goofy, and sweet. He’s like a giant golden retriever and he’s so good for my friend. “So that divorce paperwork by the way...”

She winks at me. “Don’t worry about it.” Quinn walks out of the closet and returns just as fast with an iridescent purple heart-shaped bottle. “Go with the Vera Wang. It’s spicy but sweet.”

“Hm, in loungewear, not working on a Saturday night, and delivering unsubtle perfume metaphors. Will the actual Quinn be joining us this evening? Or, just this marshmallow-soft version of my best friend?”

“Hush it,” she says with a lazy hiss, pretending to be offended. “There’s nothing wrong with taking a night off.” I tilt my chin upward and open my arms as she spritzes me.

“Well, hey, since you’re full of good guidance tonight,” I say, tugging on the sleeves of her soft cardigan. I’m sure I’ll need to dry-clean this before returning. All Quinn’s clothes need to be dry-cleaned. So annoying—who has time for that? One time I just threw a little baby powder on her suit jacket and used a hot blow dryer to finish the job. “Can I ask your advice on something?”

“Of course.” She looks puzzled at my suddenly serious expression.

“Miles is a big fan of Petey.” She looks alarmed, so I clarify by saying, “As in the rapper.” *I doubt Miles would be a fan of my asshole ex.*

“Oh.” Quinn sinks down onto the ottoman next to me so we’re shoulder-to-shoulder. “What did you tell him?”

“Everything and nothing,” I admit. “He knows I know Petey. He knows my dad worked on Petey’s debut album, but...”

“Not that Peter Mills was once the love of your life and that he clearly wants you back?”

“Yeah,” I exhale.

“Question for you—did you delete those messages from your Instagram for our sake? You didn’t want to lose face in front of your friends?” Quinn wraps her hand around mine. “Because we all hate Petey for the way he treated you, but we’ll also love you and will be here for you no matter what decisions you make in your life. There are no conditions when it comes to our family, Reese.”

“Thank you, but no.”

I honestly didn’t want to read them. I had to go cold turkey to move on from my past with Petey. I don’t want any reminders seeping in as temptation because I don’t know how my heart would react. I don’t know if I ever healed from it... I just got over it.

*But did I?*

“I deleted them because I just want our worlds to stay apart,” I say.

I hated his world anyway. I was uncomfortable from the moment I moved East with him. When Petey first started getting some attention for his music, he was advised to look single. Sex appeal sells and a committed relationship is not remotely intriguing to a sea of fangirls. So, I’d be at all his big shows, hidden in the back. I’d leave the promise ring he gave me at home. I’d sit back and watch thirsty groupies throw themselves at him, stalk him at every show, and message him at all hours of the night. I kept my mouth shut, and a smile on my face, because Petey needed support, not drama.

I knew in the end it’d all be worth it. One day, the stage lights would fade and all he’d want is to come home after a long tour and just be together. We’d both enjoy the fruits of our shared labor. Supporting a musician is not easy. You’re high when they’re high, you’re low when they’re low. You share their wins but take the hits with them too. I was in it so

deep and was so damn blinded, that by the time I came to and saw Petey for what he'd become...

Let's just say I was alone for a lot longer than I realized.

"Atlanta isn't a world away, Reese. It's a three-hour flight. He could come see you whenever," Quinn says.

"But he hasn't, has he? He's had *years*, and he never put in the effort to fix what he broke. Petey had bigger priorities, and I was always an afterthought. I didn't understand why, until now. It took a long time, but now *I* have something to be excited about. Whatever this is with Miles, *I'm excited*. It took a really long time to feel this way again."

"If you're happy, what's the problem?"

"I'm worried about Miles's ego. How do you tell a guy, who is currently unsure about himself and is feeling a little lost in his life, that the girl he's starting a relationship with dated his rich and famous music idol for almost five years?"

Quinn bites her bottom lip as she slowly shakes her head. "You don't."

*Yeah. That's what I was thinking too.*

**sixteen**

...

I'm gargling with mouthwash when the glaring ring of the doorbell sounds. Law and Sienna have one of those obnoxious doorbells that sing for a full minute. Every chime is like a mallet to my temple and it's making me want to hurl all over again. It's embarrassing I had to ask Reese to drive, but my blurry vision keeps accosting me and a car accident on the first date doesn't sound all that romantic.

I still haven't figured out how the hell I'm supposed to keep it together at a nightclub where I decided to take Reese dancing and then pull her on stage to sing to her. She doesn't know where we're going or what we're doing yet, so I could technically switch up our plans. I wonder how she feels about sitting really still in a silent, dark room.

Trudging to the heavy, grand front door, I rip it open and for the briefest moment, all my pain and discomfort dissipates. There she stands, looking like a literal angel without wings. My jaw drops when I see Reese dolled up, head to toe. It should be a crime to look that fucking good.

*"Goddamn,"* I mumble.

Her blush shiny lips spread into a sly smile. "Exactly what I was going for," she says as she winks. "But is this too much? You said we were going somewhere to dance...and it just now dawned on me that maybe I should've asked you what kind of dancing you meant." She laughs, throwing her head back, and jostling her incredibly long, smoothed hair. It's the first time I haven't seen it curly. She must notice me staring because she suddenly runs her fingers through her hair, self-consciously. "I

figured I'd fix my hair for you tonight. I usually don't do much with it besides let it air dry."

"Reese, you look so damn perfect, I don't want to share you with any other eyes tonight. I don't want to leave this house." *For multiple reasons.* She beams at me. "And I think your hair is beautiful tonight, but I like it curly too." I trace a long lock with my forefinger.

The sweet moment is fleeting, and the throbbing in my head returns, so strong, my vision goes black for a millisecond and I nearly keel over. I brace myself against the door.

"Whoa, there." She grabs under my elbow as if her little self could steady me. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine," I mutter.

"Miles." Her tone is stern. "What is wrong?"

"Come in," I say, pulling her through the door frame. My fingers laced with hers, I guide her to the kitchen and onto a bar stool at the kitchen island, while I fetch two cold bottles of water. Reese is whipping her head around, left and right, taking in the grandeur of the kitchen.

"This place is impressive, right?" I only call it to attention because it's not mine.

"Very—but...well, I don't know how to say this without you taking it the wrong way," she says, twisting the cap off the plastic bottle I just set in front of her, "but I'm used to it."

"What?"

"Oddly enough, a lot of my friends are obnoxiously rich."

"Really?" I try to arch one eyebrow but it hurts to move my face at the moment. "Are your friends our age?"

She nods. "Adler, the youngest of my friends just turned twenty-six. She wrote a bestseller which was released a couple of months ago. The advance her new publisher gave her for her next book—*insane.*"

"Impressive."

“It still pales in comparison to what her fiancé makes. He’s big into investments and I’m pretty positive he had a feature in Forbes for up-and-coming venture capitalists.”

“Damn.”

Reese points to the door. “The fancy security system you have out front is Sabin Technology—the billion-dollar security company that my other close friend, Quinn, is the Chief Marketing Officer for. Her Dad, the CEO lives right down the street. It’s one of his seven or eight luxury properties in Colorado.”

I press my lips together, my intrigue slowly turning to obvious dismay.

“Last but not least, Noa, the only Mom in our friend group, just got engaged in December to Chase Ford. He’s a big-name Hollywood—”

“Oh, I know who Chase Ford is, Reese. I lived in L.A. His face is plastered on every other billboard down Hollywood Boulevard.”

“Ah, okay—well so his wealth is self-explanatory.”

“Do you have any normal friends? Because none of this is good for my ego at the moment.”

“There’s Mani,” she says with a nonchalant shrug. “She makes under seven figures. I mean barely, but—”

“Okay, yeah so, *none of this* is good for my ego, baby.” She pauses at my word choice, a peculiar smile touching her lips. “Sorry is ‘baby’ too much?”

“Not at all,” she says, “I like how it sounds coming off your lips.”

I smile wide, ignoring my previous discomfort. “So, you’re okay with introducing me to your very successful friends as a broke wannabe singer?”

“Come here,” she says beckoning me over. I sit next to her and she flattens her small palm on my mid-back, soothingly. “I only mentioned all that to let you know, I’m around money all the time, and I’m not impressed with it. In fact, all my rich



friends don't act like they are. They hardly think about money."

"Easy to do when you have it."

She laughs. "They still struggle. They wake up every morning and stress about their days. They have insecurities and goals they can't just buy. They all have hurts, demons, trials, and tribulations like every other person." I enjoy the warm comfort as she rubs her hand up and down my back. "What I'm trying to say is that money doesn't mean anything to me. There are far more important things."

"Being?"

Trailing her hand across my back, she presses it against my chest until she finds my heartbeat under her palm. "This," she says and then giggles as she lets her fingers tiptoe to the waistband of my pants. "And this."

I laugh lightly. "You're like horny-romantic," I say with a smile. "Which is my new favorite kind of romantic by the way."

She laughs so hard she snorts but stops immediately when she notices me wince. The wooziness is building. *Oh, please stop. I don't want to be sick again.*

"Miles, what the hell is wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I'm going to be sick," I mutter before rising from the stool and making a beeline to the bathroom down the hall, which I pray is out of earshot. Sinking to my knees in front of the toilet bowl, I wretch dramatically, but there's nothing in my stomach. I tossed the entire contents of my stomach right before Reese got here. I wait until the urge to dry heave passes. *Fuck! This is not remotely sexy.*

What's worse is I feel a small pair of hands rubbing my shoulders, tenderly. I didn't hear her come in.

"Your vision is blurry...you're nauseous...does your head hurt?"

"Miserably," I mumble.

"Miles, this is a migraine."

“Is it? I’ve never had one before.”

“Seems like it,” she says.

I grunt and pull my head away from the bowl, resting my back against the bathroom wall. Reese grabs a hand towel and runs it under the faucet. Once it’s soaked, she wrings it out and folds it neatly. She hands it to me and I try to wipe my mouth.

“No,” she says, “on the back of your neck.” I do as she instructs and feel a bit of relief.

“Sorry.” I press the back of my hand against my lips. “I just need a minute and we can go.”

“Are you insane?” she squawks. “Whoops, sorry,” Reese adds, covering her mouth and speaking in a softer tone. “We need to get you into bed, and then I’m going to go.”

“I understand.” I hang my head, too weak to fight her on it. “I’m shitty company right now. I was really looking forward to tonight though. I’ll miss you.”

She rolls her eyes. “You goof, I’m leaving for the store. I need to go get a migraine cocktail.”

“A what?”

“My friend Mani gets chronic migraines. They are awful. After three years of living with her, we have perfected a very specific mix of OTC pain relievers, caffeine, and salty cracker snacks to tide her over until she can see her doctor.” Holding her hand out, she wiggles her fingers, asking for my hand to help me up. “I’m coming right back.”

The room is spinning, and I actually do need her help to get up. Securing my hand around hers, I ask, “You sure you got me?”

She plants her feet and tugs with all her might.

“Yeah, Miles. I got you.”

**seventeen**

...

After Miles finally fell asleep, I snuck out of his bedroom and got comfy on the couch of the basement living room.

I laid next to him in bed for a while after providing him with a calculated combination of ibuprofen, Tylenol, energy drinks, and saltine crackers. I can't believe he was going to try and take me out on a date like this. Although, it's next-level sweet that he'd rather pretty much die than cancel on me.

He tried to stay awake and keep the conversation flowing, just to keep me entertained. I had to shush him every time he opened his mouth. Eventually, he passed out, nuzzled into my chest. I learned from the first time we slept in the same bed Miles is an aggressive cuddler. He's like an octopus that grows extra tentacles when he sleeps. I had to perform some serious acrobatics to sneak away from his death grip. It was like putting a clingy toddler to sleep. *Yeesh.*

Settled into the plush fabric couch, I glance around at the careful decorations. This may be Miles's domain, but a woman most definitely decorated this space. The cream and beige suede pillows complement the soft rustic gray on the walls. The men I know are basically color-blind. No way Miles would know how to blend cool and warm tones beautifully like this.

Navigating the multiple remotes, I find a way to access his digital movie library. *God, we're a good match.* I find one of my favorite movies in his *Watch Again* suggestions list. I turn the volume down so low the TV is barely audible, then I snuggle into the couch while the opening scenes of *Love &*

*Basketball* light up the dark living room. I'll sit through the entire movie patiently because Sanaa Lathan is by far one of my favorite actresses, but my true love of this movie can be pinpointed to one song. I still get goosebumps when I hear Maxwell sing "This Woman's Work" on any movie, show, or radio. A classic never gets old.

And it makes me want to sing.

In fact, mid-way through the movie when the song comes on, I turn the volume up just one notch and mouth along to the beautiful lyrics.

"You love this movie, too, huh?"

Grabbing the remote, I pause the movie and turn to see Miles with the color back in his face, wearing a big smile. "Yes. This song in particular, the way it plays in the movie. I am not a fan of the remastered edition. Maxwell did it right the first time around."

"Right? I could not agree more." Miles takes a seat on the couch next to me and pulls my legs, covered with the mink throw blanket, on top of his.

"Did I wake you?"

"Nope," he says. "I woke up feeling like a new man." He kisses my forehead and lets his lips linger. "You truly are the cure. You know—it might not be too late to go out," he says, giving me puppy dog eyes.

"It's past midnight." I snuggle deeper into the blanket. "I'm cozy."

"I feel bad," he says as he presses his lips together. "I swear I planned a really nice time. My friend Sedi was spinning at Blue Horn. He planned a set list to feed your out of control Usher obsession."

"Hey, hey now," I say warningly while locking onto Miles's eyes. "*The police* will let me know when my obsession with Usher is out of control."

"I want to laugh, but I'm a little scared you're not joking."

“The risks we take with new relationships, right?” I waggle my eyebrows playfully and reach over to press my palm against his short beard. It’s shorter than usual. “You got a haircut and trimmed your beard?”

He nods. “And for the record, I was going to take you to dinner first. Nothing pretentious or over the top, but I of course would’ve picked up the bill. Then, I was going to dance with you for hours. I would’ve pulled you on stage and told the entire club I was the luckiest fucker in the world that a girl like you is out with me.”

“Mmm.” I moan in appreciation. “Perfect night. For the record, I would’ve loved that.” I rub his cheek, enjoying the roughness of his neat facial hair against my hand. “And you listened. I wanted to have fun, not to watch you flex.”

“Well, that’s good, because I was going to take you to Applebee’s. That’s about what I can afford without pulling out the credit card.”

I snort in laughter. “Hey, I’m good with Applebee’s. Their bottomless margaritas are top-tier. They used to get me into lots of trouble.”

He was stroking my shins sweetly under the blanket, but his hand is inching up past my knee now as his eyes darken, a sultry haze clouding his face. “What kind of trouble?”

“The kind that typically involves no panties.”

His hand shoots all the way up my leg to the apex of my thighs until his fingers brush against my underwear. I flinch when the tip of his finger grazes the fabric covering my clit. “Tease,” he mumbles.

“It’s not like they’re glued on,” I sass with a smile, but remind myself to take a breath. “I’m kidding. I know you want to wait until—”

“Until I could trust you,” he interjects. “If you were after me for shallow reasons, you’d be over me by now. I wanted to make sure you liked me for me.”

*Well, that’s new.* “You were testing me?” I narrow my eyes at him as his hand crawls back up my thighs. I swallow the

growing lump in my throat.

He rips the blanket off and the cool rush of air shocks my burning skin. Grabbing my foot in his strong grip, he kisses up my leg. “If it helps...” *Kiss*. “You passed.” *Kiss*. “With flying colors.” *Suck*.

I jerk so hard I nearly levitate off the couch when he sucks on the inside of my thigh, about an inch from where I really want the pressure. “*Geez*,” I groan.

He chuckles, his warm breath tickling my thigh. “If that’s all it takes to get you worked up,” he grumbles in a sexy low tenor, “then you’re going to fall in love with me tonight.” He gives me the most deliciously wicked smile before he crawls up my body and his lips find mine.

His kiss isn’t remotely tender. Miles kisses me *hard*. His lips smash into mine, his tongue assaults my own. It’s all pressure, weight, and heat between us. By the time he pulls away, I’m panting.

“I like the way you kiss.”

He winks. “You’ll like the way I do a lot of stuff,” he says. “Let me show you.” He scoops his hands under my ass and tries to lift me, but I press my weight back into the couch and place both of my hands on the solid wall of his broad chest. “I’m trying to take you to the bedroom. You want to do it here?”

“No, bedroom’s fine. Just really quick, I’m curious.” I stare straight into his light eyes. “Why’d I pass?”

He presses his lips to my forehead, then each cheek. “I’ve been more honest with you than with any woman I’ve talked up before. I’ve been the *real* me and you didn’t run. I might never amount to anything spectacular, Reese. This might be it for me—blue-collar and broke. So, a girl that likes me for me and not what I could potentially be...means everything.”

I hold his cheeks and he leans into my palm. “Stop,” I mumble.

“What?”

“Saying stuff like that about yourself. Monetary success doesn’t make you spectacular, Miles. Being a good person, a good friend...that’s what matters. I don’t know what you’re striving for, but I think you already have everything you need. If you’d show women your true colors, they’d still be crazy about you...the *real* you.”

His cheeks bunch in my hands. “It doesn’t matter now. I only want one woman.”

“Glad to hear it.”

He scoops me up again and I let him whisk me off the couch this time. After tossing me on the bed, he grabs the half-empty energy drink from his nightstand.

“Does your head still hurt?” I ask, concerned. It’s only been a few hours since he looked outright pathetically ill.

He shakes his head right before he pounces on me, can still in hand. Miles takes another little sip as a mischievous smile claims his face. “It’s for a little energy boost. What we’re about to do is going to take all night.”

I feel the anticipatory ache building and for some ridiculous reason, suddenly I’m nervous. Sex is usually a rehearsed dance for me. Suck him off a little, lay perfectly still while he misses the target with his tongue, fake the first orgasm, bounce on top a bit, bend over the bed, fake the second orgasm, and then rub his back while pretending I’m out of breath and then tell him it was the best I’ve ever had. I shouldn’t be nervous when I’ve rehearsed the exact same scene a hundred times. But right now, the new sensations are rattling my confidence. I’m hyper-aware that my skin is beginning to dampen with nervous sweat. My shaky breath is loud. My heartbeat is erratic. It feels strangely like I’m seventeen again, backstage at The Garage, about to take the plunge for the first time.

Miles pushes the cardigan off my shoulders, letting it slump onto the bed. Using just the tips of his fingers, he traces my shoulder to my hands sending pins, needles, and full-on daggers of nerves across my body.



“What are you thinking about?” he asks.

*Honestly?* “Just you,” I say. “I like the way you touch me.”

“I like the way you feel.”

*Mmmm. This man has all the right words.*

“What do you think?” he asks in a grumbly whisper. “You up for a marathon?” He holds up the can and I part my lips. At first, I think his aim just sucks, but then I realize he’s purposely pouring the liquid down my chest, into my cleavage. He catches the dribble with his tongue before dragging it from between my breasts to the base of my neck.

“I want you so fucking bad,” he growls into my ear. He sets aside the drink, then guides me backward into the pillows wedged against his fabric-covered headboard. Slowly, he pushes the hem of my dress up, then tugs my panties to the side with two fingers. Using his pinky, he traces up my already wet slit. I shudder when he grazes the jackpot. The second time he trails his finger across my crease, I hear his fingers slick against my arousal. “Feels like you really want me too,” he murmurs.

“Miles, stop teasing me. It’s time to show your work.”

“What?” he asks, his playful finger halting in place. He looks confused.

“Do you remember the first time you slept over? You told me sex should be a huge deal. It’d make me crazy, thirsty and...*obsessive* I think is the term you used.”

He nods before nuzzling into my ear, a little moan escaping his lips. *Geez, he’s intimate.* He runs his hands all over my body patiently, purposely, like simply touching my bare skin could get him off. “I remember saying that.”

“Good. Now show me what I’ve been missing.”

Rolling onto his back, he pulls his shirt over his head. The dim lamplight touches the hard rectangle swells of his abdomen. “Climb on top,” he demands.

*All right, fine. Guess my quads are up first.* First straddling his lower stomach, I shimmy down his body so I can rest on his hips. I reach for the obvious bulge in his pants, but he clasps his hands firmly around my ass, stopping me.

“Hey, baby?”

“What?” I ask.

“You’re moving in the wrong direction.” He licks his lips.  
“Your seat is up here.”

**eighteen**

...

She's feral.

I love driving her wild like this.

Reese was a little surprised, at first. Maybe she needed some time to figure out how I operate in the bedroom. There's a lot about myself I'm unsure of. *This isn't one of them.* Moments ago, I grabbed her by the hips and sat her on my face. Holding her in place, steadying her, I told her to get comfortable because I was in no rush. She wouldn't put her weight on me, balancing on her knees, but after a couple of minutes with her soft, warm thighs pressed against my cheeks, she's grinding on my tongue, like an animal in heat, trying to get her fix.

"*Fuck, yes baby,*" I mumble against her clit. "Use me." She likes when I talk and my breath tickles her sensitive little button. She starts to tense and I squeeze her fleshy round ass as she grips the top of the headboard.

"I'm...I just...please..." Reese tries to form thoughts but her words come out in senseless breathy rasps.

"You want it?" I growl.

"Yes," she whimpers and I slip my tongue into her opening. She shrieks as she comes so hard, she tries to hop off her ride—but I don't let her. Wrapping my hands tightly around her back, I keep her in place, continuing to flick all over her crease until she's past dripping. She whimpers, writhes, pleads, and groans, but I don't stop until she's so spent that her body goes limp.

Guiding her right thigh up and over my head, I help her settle into the pillows. Her eyes are glazed over and she's wearing a satisfied expression.

"Look at that," I tease as I reach behind her back and yank down the zipper of her tight little black dress. "And that was with you still dressed." I was too eager. Her dress is pushed up, but still on. I didn't even pull her thong off, I just yanked it to the side when she was on top of me.

"You're a little cocky in the bedroom, aren't you?"

I smirk at her. "Is that okay?"

She closes her eyes and nods assuredly. "Definitely. I like it." Then, she pushes me backward and climbs off the bed. Waltzing over to the bedroom door, I almost think she's leaving until she flicks on the overhead light. Taking over her own zipper, she makes a meal out of peeling her dress off slowly. With the bright lights surrounding us, I see everything—enjoying the sexiest strip show I've ever been treated to.

She unclasps her strapless black bra, and my jaw drops along with it. I mean to say something, to compliment the flawless masterpiece that is her body, but my brain is blank. I can't take my eyes off her perfectly shaped, supple, milky tits, with her erect rosy nipples looking icy cold... I should probably put them in my mouth and warm them up as soon as possible.

Finally glancing up, I notice her confident smile, obviously pleased with my reaction. Her hands find the dip of her slim waist, and she juts her hips out in a sexy pose. "Here's the thing—I'm kind of cocky too."

"Get over here. Now," I demand. Once she's between my legs, I swivel her around, admiring the full round curve of her ass as I pull off her panties, the last article of clothing in my way. Now she's all mine. All night. "How do you want it?"

"Isn't it your turn?" She spins back around and tries to sink to her knees, but I pull her right back up.

"Nuh-uh. Tonight's all for you."

She rolls her eyes. “Come on, Miles, I like to play fair. What’s your kink?”

“What? Like handcuffs?”

She shakes her head, her long hair spilling over her shoulders. I brush it back, unwilling to lose the visual of her picture-perfect tits.

“No, I mean what really gets you going? I’ll do whatever you like.” She steps to the side, making room for me to fetch a condom from my nightstand drawer. Her eyes are locked on my crotch as I pull down my pants and fist the tip of my rapidly growing erection.

“Sit down,” I command.

Once she’s on the bed, I toss the black packet onto her bare lap. She holds it in the air and raises her brows. “Magnum, I see.” Sucking in her lips, she tries to hide her smile.

“They’re a little snug.” I pair my wink with an overconfident smirk.

“So, so cocky.” She tsks her tongue. I take one step closer and she frees the condom from the wrapper and expertly rolls it over my so-hard-it’s-uncomfortable cock. Leaning over her, I push her back into the mattress, my bare chest smashed against hers, my hardness resting on her thigh.

“My kink is you getting off. So, tell me how you want it,” I growl in her ear.

“Goddamn, you’re good,” she hums. “I am so turned on right now.”

She presses her hand against my chest, pushing me off her so she has room to roll over. On her belly, she wiggles down until her toes find the floor. Bent over the bed with her ass poking in the air, she looks back at me with hungry, demanding eyes.

“I want it wild. Like you want me to remember this forever.”

\_\_\_\_\_

## reese

I asked for it.

And I got it.

Miles plunges into me, filling me from behind. He's so deep, the spots he's touching are inflamed with sensitivity. I'd call it heaven, but it's too damn satisfying to be righteous. Perhaps this is hell. Perhaps I don't care. I just know I don't want him to stop.

*"Ooh, fuuuck. More,"* I plead.

With each thrust, he groans louder in appreciation. His approval comes through raspy breaths as he praises me and how tightly I'm wrapping around him.

"Baby, your pussy is a weapon," he growls, smacking my ass. *Hard.*

Typical Reese would make a snarky joke and ask if it's killing him, but typical Reese is gone. I can't speak. I'm on a cloud, far, far away. Every cell in my body feels swollen, ready to burst. Every sensation is heightened. Every breath falls short. Gasping, moaning, paralyzed with pleasure—*I. Am. Gone.*

Miles bends over me, lining his sweaty chest against my back. His skin is on fire, my skin is burning, press them together and we're damn near volcanic. "Baby, talk to me," Miles croaks in my ear.

"No," I mumble. *Leave me. Let me drift away as you keep nudging against that spot that drives me insane.* But there's no rest for the weary. Rising, he flips me over in an instant so I can see his soft smile and the bead of sweat gliding over his pec and dripping onto my thigh.

"How do you feel?" he asks, his eyes trailing over my breasts like he missed them while they were smashed into the



mattress. When his eyes finally find mine, I can tell he's in no mood for jokes.

"I feel like I've never done this right a day in my life... Until now." Reaching around his neck, I guide his lips to mine. I grant him tender, soft kisses letting him know he's got all of me. The forward wild child, and the sweet woman who knows how to hold up her man. "It feels so good."

He grabs my breast, rolling my aching nipple between his thumb and forefinger. A look of hungry need clouds his eyes. "I need to come."

"Go ahead," I cajole, wedging my hand between our bodies and trying to grab his rock-hard manhood that's pressed against my belly. "Who's stopping you?"

"You first."

"You mean me fourth?"

His playful, boasting smile returns. "Three already? Really?" Straightening up, he rubs his fingers up and down my sopping sex as if he's confirming my statement.

"The third was quiet," I say as his dancing fingers, teasing my clit, causes my head to go fuzzy again.

"How about one more?"

I let out an exasperated breath. "I guess. *If you insist.*"

He chuckles and I soak up the sunshine-sweet expression on his face. *Strange.* I've never been this nervous, yet comfortable during sex. I've never been this passionate, and yet playful at the same time. Sex with Miles is a medley of mixed emotions, and I didn't know I needed every single one. I had no idea what I was missing.

This is what he meant. The feeling is full. Needy. Lustful. Comforting. We're not even done and I already want the next round.

*It's a huge deal.*

*Huge, huge, deal.*

“Can I...” Miles trails off, biting down on his lip. His apprehensive question makes my heart freak out in my chest.

*What? Why? What’s wrong?* “Are you okay?”

“Yeah...I, um...don’t be offended, okay?”

“Okay...”

He strokes the outsides of my thighs. “I haven’t had sex in months, and I know I’m safe. I don’t know how to ask you without ruining the mood, but if it’s okay with you I want to take this condom off.”

“Really? Raw dog?”

He rolls his eyes and grumbles, “Please don’t say *raw dog* to anyone...ever.”

I try to stifle my giggle. “It’s okay to ask,” I say, watching his light green eyes dart nervously back and forth. “It *hasn’t* been months since I’ve had sex, which is why I’m on birth control, I always use condoms, and get tested routinely. I’m safe too.”

“Okay.” He nods while biting his lip as his eyes fall between my thighs. I’m suddenly very aware of how naked we are under the lights. *Why now?* We should’ve had this conversation about an hour ago. “Tell me it’s better with me,” he whispers.

“It’s better with you.” I immediately acquiesce, feeding his ego.

“Tell me I drive you crazy.” The sexy determination returns to his darkening eyes.

“You drive me so fucking crazy.”

“Tell me it’s just you and me, now...and I can take this condom off.”

“Just you and me,” I parrot as I reach for the base of his erection and pull off the rubber, discarding it on the floor. Laying back, I guide him to my entrance before I hoist my ankles over his shoulders. “And now, *it’s just you and me.*”

We both cry out when he slips into me. Me—a whispered shriek. Him—a throaty growl of appreciation. My arousal is plentiful and he's met with no resistance. Flesh against flesh, it feels otherworldly. And it feels so fucking sinfully delicious that the clock is ticking...for both of us.

My favorite part of an orgasm is the brief moment of calm before the storm rips through me. There are about five seconds when everything is tranquil and the warm pleasure seeps from my head to my toes. My body quietly embraces the intensity for the briefest moment before my muscles react—clenching and spasming, trying to fight back against the pleasure. If a guy really hits it right—the way Miles does—my toes curl so hard they feel like they might break off.

The rest of the big event is just my body trying to cool and control the overwhelming sensation, drowning out the good stuff.

But those five seconds...

*Mmmm.*

I live for that peaceful pleasure. Pure numbing blissful... *yes.* There's no other way to describe it. It makes air worth breathing. It makes colors vivid. It's the briefest flash of heaven.

“Miles...go slow. Let me enjoy this—”

My favorite few seconds come and go. The world completely stops, then hurtles forward at warp speed. I whimper when the pleasure rips through me, leaving my legs boneless and shaky.

“You're so sexy when you're coming,” he rasps, continuing to pump into me, closing in on his release. “Where can I—”

“Wherever,” I moan. “No, wait. Stay with me.” I wrap my hands around his taut, smooth ass and don't let go until he's spilled every last drop.

“*God, Reese,*” he groans as he twitches, causing my legs still resting on his shoulders to bounce.

“It was good for me too, baby, but just ‘Reese’ is fine.” I flash him a cheeky smile.

He snorts in laughter as he falls onto the bed next to me, wrapping his large hand around mine. “Smartass.”

I return his laugh, feeling the high of pleasure saturate my bones. I’m so high, I feel like I’m weightless, just floating. I have no plans of coming down. So, *this* is the feeling I’m left with after the most satisfying, fulfilling sex I’ve ever had...

Concentrated, unadulterated, unsurpassable...

*Joy.*

**nineteen**

...

“Miles,” I hiss, poking my head through the door that leads out of the basement. He’s sitting at the kitchen island in front of his open laptop with his headphones hanging off one ear. He laughs when he sees me trying to conceal my body with the door.

“We’re still alone, baby. Law and Sienna won’t be home until this afternoon.”

With that, I proudly strut into the kitchen, wearing nothing but one of Miles’s soft cotton white undershirts. It hangs low enough on me to conceal what my thong most certainly doesn’t.

“Where are they?”

“Down in Colorado Springs—The Antlers. Some big charity event they helped sponsor.”

“Hmm, that’s nice of them,” I mumble distractedly as my stomach growls in anger. Making myself at home, I open cabinet doors until I find a bowl that matches the one sitting in front of Miles.

Yanking his headphones down so they rest around his neck, Miles says, “I just needed a snack. I’ve been up for a while. Get dressed, I’ll take you to a nice breakfast.”

I point to the box of cereal in front of me. “Don’t be ridiculous. Trix is gourmet eating in my book.” Without hesitating, I snag the cardboard box and watch the medley of rainbow colors quickly fill my glass bowl. “I could bathe in this stuff.” Grabbing the milk that’s still sitting next to Miles

on the counter, I wet my cereal and pop the jug back in the fridge. *Men—never afraid of dairy going bad.*

“I keep waiting for the real you to appear,” Miles says, examining me with a perplexed expression.

“What?” I pause with my spoon about an inch from my lips. “The real me?”

“Yeah, no way I got this lucky. I’m back in town for a millisecond and I meet a fucking *piece* who’s out of my league, way too sexy, smart, has a great job and close friends, likes to stay in, and loves my kind of music. Plus, she wouldn’t have minded a cheap date at Applebee’s”—he nods to my cereal bowl—“and likes kids’ cereal as much as me.”

“First of all, had we actually gone to dinner last night, I absolutely would’ve ordered the shrimp. Seafood is not cheap.”

“Their shrimp is frozen before it’s beer-battered and deep-fried.”

“What’s your point?” I ask before shoving a heaping spoon full of fruity cereal in my mouth.

“Is this all a show for my benefit, or are you actually this perfect?”

I snort. *Perfect?* I chew slowly, contemplating an honest response. “Perhaps I am motivated to be on my best behavior for you.”

“Meaning?” He hangs his head and lifts his eyes in that cute puppy dog way. His look is enough motivation for me to push my cereal bowl away, despite my growling belly, and grab his hand.

“I feel like myself around you. I haven’t felt like myself in a long time. I don’t uh...want to lose this”—I point back and forth, to his chest, then mine—“energy. I’m not sure where it came from, but I want it to stay.”

“What do you mean?”

“In high school, my whole world was music. I’d skip class left and right to watch my dad in the studio. Watching him

engineer a track was literally like watching magic happen. He did it all. He composed, mixed, and produced. Whatever the artist needed, he became. A mentor, a friend, a swift kick in the ass when they needed it. It's a grueling process but the end result was..." I let out a deep sigh. "My dad used to tell me that producing a good song was about anchor and flow. You have to anchor the listener to a rhythm, a beat, a tune, something powerful to catch their attention, and once they were hooked, *then* the lyrics could flow."

"That's insightful," Miles says. "I like that."

"Dad's job was to be the anchor. To get a person to listen, and then the artist could speak—*flow*. He mostly worked with hip-hop artists, trying to coax a little more poeticism out of their music than hard beats and angry words. That's what I always thought I'd be doing with my life right now—following in his footsteps, minus the drinking problem."

"Why aren't you?" he asks.

"I turned eighteen and moved to Atlanta. I let my passion for my boyfriend override my common sense." *I debate it...I should just tell him about Petey...but what does it matter? An ex is an ex.* "I had tunnel vision, which made me careless, and I got my heart broken really bad. I think I blamed music because it made more sense to me. My mom swooped in and put a giant Band-Aid over the entire situation. She told me the best way to get better was to grow up. So, I did. I tried to be like my dad and I got burnt, so I started acting like my mom. Or, tried to anyway."

Miles nods along, silent, carefully soaking up every word.

"I've been feeling lost for a long time like I was sleeping on life, just going through the motions. But then I met you at The Garage and for a reason I can't explain, you reminded me of the old me. Just someone who loves music like I used to. I met you and suddenly, that old me woke up. I've been thinking maybe I can find a way to be the good parts of my dad *and* the good parts of my mom. Maybe I need balance."

"Hm, balance seems like a good thing." Miles brings my hand to his lips and plants a small kiss on each one of my



knuckles. I smile at him while subtly scooting my cereal bowl back with my left hand. He laughs and releases me when he watches me eat awkwardly with my non-dominant hand.

“What were you listening to?”

“Just some old covers I sang.”

My excitement takes over and I don't even stop to ask. I rip Miles's headphones out of the aux port and press play on the YouTube video he has pulled up.

It takes about five seconds of the interlude before the world falls away. The kitchen disappears; Miles drifts away. It's just me, this sad love song, the most painfully beautiful words, singing straight to my soul. We're in a world that's obsessed with trap music and wordless club beats. On the rare occasion I hear soulful sounds like this, it seeps into my bones, flooding me with every harrowing emotion the artist felt when they wrote this. The song is good...

But Miles's performance—his cover—makes it perfect.

I have to listen to it at least twice more before I finally pull myself out of the trance. The kitchen snaps back into place, and Miles's handsome face is once again in clear view.

He looks bashful, running his hands against his espresso-colored facial hair. “I used to love to sing,” he says, forcing a humorless laugh. Stroking his finger against the touchpad, he opens a folder on the screen that reads Demos. He double-clicks on a file and a new type of song plays. A commercialized, pop-filled, heaping pile of desperation rings through the laptop speakers. Miles laughs at me trying my hardest not to be so damn direct for once.

“You can say it.”

I clear my throat. “Say what?” I ask, dead set on swallowing my tongue.

“That's the first song on my demo. It's not good. I didn't even really write it. The producers threw out all my suggestions.”

“A good producer is supposed to help *your* vision come to life,” I say. “Not force you to put something together that isn’t *you*.”

He pops his shoulders. “I wanted a deal *so bad*. Have you ever wanted something so much it fucking hurts? The longing physically ached. I wanted to be a singer, not a construction worker. I would’ve put on blue lipstick and sang K-pop if it got me closer to securing the career I wanted. But I did everything I was advised to do and still, nobody wanted to sign me.”

“But you’re good, Miles. You have something special.”

He presses his cool lips to my forehead and the smell of fruity cereal kicks up between us. “Thank you,” He kisses me again, this time on the lips. “But I don’t know...I’ve been kind of thinking about how I’d feel if I let it all go. Maybe there are other things here in Denver that are worth my attention.” He looks me dead in the eyes, indicating he means me.

“You want to give up?”

Licking his lips, he pulls away, like I said something wrong. “Maybe I want to grow up.”

*He’s not going to hear it from me.* I just slept with the guy and told him his hard dick was the eighth wonder of the world. Obviously, he thinks I’m just biased. He needs to hear how much potential he has from someone else.

“I’m meeting my dad tomorrow, Miles. I’m still allowed to talk to him about you, right? I just have a good feeling about what he could do for you. Dad has a special way of pulling out the best parts of musicians and helping them lay it all on the track. And screw demos. Make an album. You can sing whatever you want, however you want. All you need is people to listen.”

He scoffs, loudly. Heading to the fridge, he fetches the milk I just stashed away. “That’s sort of the problem, Reese. No one’s listening.”

“Hey,” I say firmly. “I’m listening. *I’m someone.*”

“Reese,” he says in a groan as he returns, “I’ve never even thought as far as an album. Step one is get a record label to back you, *then* make an album. I never finished step one.”

“That’s why indie artists are running circles around labels. They aren’t worried about steps, Miles. They’re worried about making music and connecting with people. That’s what you should be doing. We can help—”

“Reese—”

“Please, just think about it?” I beg.

“I don’t know...”

“Here, pull your pants down, I have a surefire way of convincing you.”

He laughs as he fills his cereal bowl to the brim, then drenches it with milk. Picking up the colored corn puffs that fell out of the bowl he says, “You keep bragging about this blow job.”

“It’s brag worthy. If they gave out Grammys for head, I’d be *revered* in the music community.” He snickers but his eyes latch onto my lips, hungrily. “Okay, I’m kidding. Now I feel like I’m officially overselling myself.”

“Time will tell,” he says with a cheeky smile.

I poke my tongue out at him. “So, what do you say?”

“To head?”

I narrow my eyes at his evasive humor. “*To making an album.*”

“Reese.”

“Miles.”

His eyes are cautious, mine are blazing.

“All right, just don’t go getting any ideas in your pretty little head,” he says, stroking my cheek with the pad of his thumb. “You don’t even know if your dad wants to work with me.” Cocking his head to the side, he gives me a questioning look. “Are you still going to be into me if I end up just a blue-

collar guy, working construction? Or is being a recording artist a dealbreaker kind of situation for you?"

"Stop. I like you," I reassure him. "Whether you want to be a venue manager, construction worker, hell—go be a refrigerator mechanic if you want. I like *you*, not what you do. I just think this," I say pointing to the computer screen, "is a big part of you. I don't want to see you give up too soon."

"You're incredible." His words are sweet, but he hangs his head and shakes it side to side. "I've never been with a woman like you."

"What am I like?" I smile at him, a little nervous to hear his answer because usually when it comes to men, it has something to do with how I look naked.

"Genuine."

*Oh...that's a compliment I like.*

Miles taps the tip of my nose. "How the hell am I going to keep you all to myself?"

"As long as you keep doing that thing with your tongue I like, you've got me all to yourself." I trail my finger from the hollow of his neck down the center of his muscular pecs, pushing against his white undershirt that matches the one on me.

He laughs. "Can I always expect you to ruin sweet moments with your constant sexual appetite?"

Flattening my expression, I flutter my eyelashes. "Hell yes."

**twenty**

...

Daddy-daughter studio Sundays are supposed to entail me, my dad, Pizza Pockets, beer—well, now, non-alcoholic beer—and a couple of hours messing around in his in-home studio. What it should not involve is my uppity controlling mother who insists on having a sit-down, three-course dinner. All I wanted to do tonight was talk to Dad about Miles’s music, but I can’t in front of Mom.

I don’t want her to know music is on my mind again. I don’t want her to know my new guy is wrapped up in what she calls ridiculous fantasies too.

Poking at my roast chicken leg, I glower at Dad who doesn’t notice because he’s *actually* listening to my mom chatter on about her court win this week.

“Well, that’s the thing,” Mom says animatedly as she slams her fist on the table, “they handed over the incriminating documents without even knowing it.” Her smile is wicked. “The look on their faces when I showed the judge exactly how much money was embezzled from *their* own records.”

“My baby is a killer in the courtroom.”

*Oh, gross.* Together, or not—who wants to hear their parents call each other baby?

Dad widens his eyes at me across his new dining table in a clear command. Come to think of it, the living room has a new couch. These nice white porcelain plates are definitely new...

“Your mom is pretty impressive, isn’t she?” Dad asks unobtrusively.

“Definitely,” I mumble in a monotone. Dad shoots me a pointed look so I add, “I’m glad it worked out, Mom. Good job. Atta girl.” *What the actual hell? Did I just “atta girl” my mom?* The words taste as awkward as they sound. *Dammit.*

It’s not that I don’t want Mom here. But all of us together? It doesn’t mix. Most of my childhood was listening to her bitch about what a deadbeat, whore-hungry, waste of space Dad was...and now they are playing footsie? What’s the appropriate age for a midlife crisis? Mom’s forty-five, a mid-life crisis would be right on schedule...

“Thanks, honey.” Mom clears her throat. “How’s Henley doing these days?”

“Fine, I guess. I don’t see him much. I mostly do research and paperwork for his associates. Eli Walsh—know him?”

She shakes her head, and her long blonde hair, straight and smooth, falls down her shoulder. *Odd.* I rarely see my mom without a neatly coiled bun at the nape of her neck. “Are you guys involved?”

“Why do you ask that?” My chicken leg is suddenly very interesting and I need all my focus to wedge my fork tine between the meat and the perfectly roasted chicken skin.

Mom circles her face with her finger. “I don’t know, you had this look on your face when you said his name. Sorry, I didn’t mean to assume.”

*Well, we slept together off and on for a year, so you assumed right.* “Eli and I are just friends. He’s a really good mentor.”

“Ah, okay,” she says, picking up her fork and knife. Slicing through her piece of white meat, she bites her bottom lip like she’s trying to hold back her next comment. She must change her mind quickly because after taking a big bite, chewing like a rabid bunny, and swallowing so hard I hear the gulp, she blurts out, “Speaking of mentors—”

“Robin—”

“What?” She shrugs her shoulders like she’s innocent. “She’s my daughter too.”

“We *just* had a conversation about how when you push her—you push her *away*. Remember? You said you wanted to connect with your daughter.” Dad’s tone is coddling and not his usual exasperated breathy drawl when speaking to my mother.

“I understand that, but *she* needs to understand she’s supported, we see her potential, and want her to strive for the best. No one can enjoy their life in Denver off of an entry-level paralegal’s salary. It’s either further her career, or get married, and she hasn’t had a relationship since Pet—”

I clear my throat. “You guys see me sitting right here, right? Care to include me in this conversation about *me*?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Mom turns to face me. Her eyes turn animated, but her smile is pressed. “One of the new lawyers at my company runs a tutoring program on the weekends, specifically for people with test anxiety. He’s helped students who failed the LSATs, and the Bar, turn things completely around. He has a spot in his next class—”

“Mom.”

“I know the LSATs are a tough test. I just don’t want you to give up on your—”

“*Mom.*” I set my fork back down. I’m satisfied with the soup and salad we ate before the lemon roast chicken was even out of the oven. Why she’s cooking like we’re hosting the president tonight, I’m not sure. “I don’t have test anxiety.”

“Then what is it? You’re a smart girl, Reese, you can do better than 150s on the LSATs.” Well, she held it in as long as she could, but there’s that bossy tone again. I want to let the word vomit unleash right now and tell her my actual test scores were in the top three percent, and while she couldn’t get into Stanford Law, *I did*. But if I told her that, I’d also have to tell her the reason I lied to her about my potentially brag-worthy legal career is...

From the bottom of my heart...

*I don’t want to end up like her.*



Red-eyed. Dog-tired. Barely present. Dad might've been drunk for most of my life, but he was a happy drunk who liked for me to pal around. Mom was drunk off ambition. She was always gone. Between studying her ass off in law school, and then hustling her way up to lead council at her corporation, she was never there. Mom's whole life could be a sales pitch—*Knocked-up at eighteen? Don't worry! It's not over! You can still have a life and become a very successful, powerful corporate lawyer.* The teeny-tiny fine print is you'll alienate your family and get your first gray hair at thirty-four.

But of course, I'm not going to blurt that out to my mother. She annoys the shit out of me, but I love her. I don't want to see her blue puppy-dog eyes hurt. I can be direct with everyone else on this planet except her. Maybe because I don't have her approval.

But I still want it.

"I'll think about it, Mom. Right now, I don't have time to take on tutoring. But you know what? As a paralegal, I'm learning a lot of things hands-on. Maybe it'll help some of the legal concepts, jargon, and mentality just," I tap my temples with both forefingers, "permeate. You know?"

Her smile is rightfully skeptical. She recognizes a blow-off. I've been doing it to her for years. "Okay, well when you're ready." She pops another bite of chicken in her mouth. Covering her mouth, she mumbles between chewing, "And also when you're ready, my stylist does a nice Keratin treatment...if you ever want to get your hair under control—"

"*Mom!*" I stab my fork into my chicken leg with unnecessary aggression.

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"I don't see it," Dad says as he searches his email for Miles's music.

"It's a forward, with attachments. I bet it went to your spam folder."

“Ah,” he says, “here it is. It’s better to send these as private links by the way. I’m willing to bet if Miles is sending attachments to record labels, they aren’t looking at them.”

“Noted. I’ll tell him that.”

Dad holds up his finger and then pulls on his huge, clunky, plug-in studio headphones that make him look like he’s going to help guide a landing plane. They look goofy, but damn—the sound is unrivaled. He’s used the same brand for over a decade, now. I have an equally ugly pair in pink.

Satisfied when Dad starts bobbing his head to the music, I look around the basement and notice there’s new furniture here too. There are two black leather sofa chairs and a matching loveseat surrounding a glass coffee table. He even got a patterned area rug to complete a quaint sitting area. On his production desk, I notice a new MIDI keyboard and a fancy-looking mixer. Dad really isn’t one for a shopping spree... unless it’s at a liquor outlet.

I plop down on one of the comfy leather chairs when Dad shoos me away, annoyed at my invasive stare. I can’t help it, I want him to see Miles the way I do—so much talent and a really good heart. I debate whipping out my phone and texting him, but in case this doesn’t go the way I planned, I don’t want to make him nervous. I’ve either found a way to reinspire Miles’s music career, or I’ve found a way to crush his spirit even more. Dad won’t work with just anyone. He has ridiculously high standards and does not like musicians who refuse to put the work in or take a heavy dose of constructive criticism.

When Dad takes off his headphones and joins me in the sitting area, I try to play it cool.

“So, this is all new,” I say, nodding at the new pieces of furniture and then over his shoulder at his new sound equipment.

“*This*,” Dad says tapping on the coffee table, “is all your mother.” He follows my gaze over his shoulder. “All *that* is for getting back to serious work. I have a vocal booth coming in next week.”

My eyes pop in surprise. “You’re kidding me. What are those running these days?”

“A few grand, but the one I got set me back a bit more. Top of the line.”

“*Damn.* Did you win the lottery in jail?”

Dad snorts. “My royalties are still coming in from albums I produced back in the day, and the one benefit to being locked up is you can’t waste your money on bullshit.”

“Well, I guess incarceration wasn’t a total waste of your time, then.” I press my lips together and form a sarcastic smile.

“Smart mouth.” He flicks the air in my direction.

“Anyway, why is Mom picking out your furniture?”

“Yeah...” He runs his hands through his thick, wavy hair. “About that. We need to talk...”

“Ew, Dad. Since when we do say ‘we need to talk’ to each other?” I get my directness from Dad, I’m not sure why he’s tiptoeing around now. “Just spit it out.”

“Fine. Your mother’s moving in. We’re happy. I wouldn’t be surprised if we got married before we die.”

*Oh.* Leaning back into my seat, I cross my arms as the leather crunches underneath me. He raises his eyebrows expectantly at me. “What?” I shrug my shoulders, attempting to seem nonchalant. “Are you expecting me to throw a tantrum or something?”

“Do you want to?”

“You’re a grown-ass man, who you chose to date is none of my business.”

“Truth. But technically this affects you too. She’s going to be around.”

“She’s my mom. She’s always been around.”

“Yeah, but I’m talking about on Sundays, around the house \_\_\_”

“And at cheer practice and PTA meetings?” I ask with bright eyes and mock enthusiasm.

“Reese,” he grumbles. “Can you be an adult for half a second, here? Are you okay with this?”

I relax my brows. I know Dad cares about our bond as much as I do. Does he expect me to stand in the way of what he wants? “Be honest—does Mom make you happy? You guys never seemed to have anything in common outside of me. All she’s done for years is nag the shit out of you. Does she even know you’ve bought all this new production equipment?”

Dad flashes me a warm smile. “She’s the one who suggested it.”

“*Really?*” I ask with a tone full of skepticism.

“She told me my career had nothing to do with the booze and I should trust my creativity...*sober*. Your mom never had an issue with music, Reese. It was the drinking, the lack of taking responsibility, and running away from growing up. It took three DUIs and getting locked up to realize that floating through life wasn’t good enough. I want to be present. I don’t want to miss out on my family.”

“And you’re sure this isn’t all moving too fast?”

He scoffs. “Fast? You’re twenty-seven. Which means I’ve known your mother for twenty-seven years and about nine months.”

“*Geez*, Dad.” I shrivel in my seat and scrunch my nose in disgust.

“What?”

“You just admitted to knocking Mom up on your first date.”

He lets out a snarky laugh. “I wouldn’t even call it a date. We were in the back of an old Camry—”

“*Oookaaay*. Anyway—back to literally any other subject, what did you think of Miles’s demo?” I point over his shoulder to his desk, where his laptop is still open, Miles’s tracks still on the screen.

“The demo is garbage. But the stuff you sent me earlier this week—his YouTube videos, the stuff on social media—*that* I like.”

“Garbage seems harsh...”

Dad shakes his head. “Not him. The songs. His voice is the only reason that shit is somewhat tolerable. The production was lazy. I could tell you exactly what farm those loops were swiped from. The lyrics are recycled. I bet you anything Miles didn’t write those demos—he just performed them.”

“He said they were professionally produced.”

Dad’s laugh is humorless. “Professional and quality are two different concepts these days. What Miles has is a demo that was basically like buying the rights to a track from Songs-R-Us. There’s nothing unique or compelling about it, but because it’s mastered in a professional studio, I bet you they lured him in and had him pay a hefty up-front fee.”

“Poor Miles.”

Rubbing his eyes, Dad grumbles, “It’s not just music. There are a lot of people making a lot of money because of gatekeeping. It’s not what you do. It’s who you know and who follows you. There’s a lack of authenticity and creativity, everyone is just trying to copycat what they think works. And anyway, there’s no such thing as a fair shot anymore. It’s just those who give in, give up, or somehow hit the lucky lottery.”

“Well,” I say, tilting my head, “on that super positive note, how do you feel about helping Miles beat the odds?”

Dad leans back and crosses his ankle over his knee. His eyes narrow. “What?”

“He has the idea that you have to get a label to sign you before you can make a decent album. It’s why his feet are stuck in the mud. I was thinking if he could get a little traction going the indie route—”

I stop talking the moment Mom’s footsteps are audible on the stairs. Looking over to the basement entrance, she’s wearing a lap apron and carrying a tray of brownies.

“Thank you, honey. That’s mighty sweet of you,” Dad coos. After setting the tray down on the coffee table, Mom plants herself on the loveseat. She sits so close to Dad, she’s practically sitting on him and he takes it as an invitation to wrap his arm around her. “I’m not going to lie, I love your courtroom stories but you’re so sexy all domestic like this too.” Her smile lights her face right up as she wiggles against him like she’s ticklish under his touch.

“You guys see me, right? Sitting...right...here.” I wave my hand in the air. “I don’t need to see all that.”

“You told her?” Mom asks and Dad nods in response.

“She’s cool,” he says shooting me a wink. “Right? In fact, Reese was just telling me how she wants me to help her produce a few songs for her new...”

“Her new what? *Boyfriend?*” Mom’s eyes grow into starling large circles.

“Um...” I stall. *Is Miles my boyfriend?*

“If he’s your boyfriend, the answer is no,” Dad says.

Another reason I would probably have a promising career in law is that I am a skilled, quit-witted liar when I need to be. “He’s definitely not my boyfriend. I met him when I went to poke around The Garage. You always told me talent would reveal itself from anywhere if I kept my eyes open. Miles *is* talented. And my eyes are open. I just have this feeling, he could really be something.”

Dad shuffles his hands together and is quiet for a moment...debating. “Why don’t you help me?”

“What?”

“Yeah, I’ll give him a shot. We can play around in the studio, maybe just an EP to start. I’ll show you my process. I’ll teach you how to be a great producer. You were always itching to take the lead in the studio, maybe now’s a good time.” He smiles at me and it’s clear in this moment his willingness to help isn’t about helping Miles...it’s about helping me.

Mom interrupts before I can gleefully agree. Furrowing her brows, she says, “I don’t understand—so, you have time to mess around in the studio, but you don’t have time to study for your LSAT?”

I don’t have a good response outside of *mind your own business*, so I stay quiet and let the awkward silence fill the air. I didn’t think this obstacle through. Now, I’m sort of regretting not throwing that tantrum I wanted to earlier. I don’t need her pulling me back down to my mundane reality when my head and heart are on a cloud at the moment.

“Robin,” Dad mutters harshly but squeezes her shoulders affectionately. “Remember?”

“Sorry.” Mom looks me in the eyes and speaks a little more clearly. “Sorry, honey. It’s not my business.” *Well said.* And when the hell did Dad become the mom-tamer? Figuring out how to get her to apologize? Now *that’s* a class I would make time to take.

“Thank you.” I watch her mouth open and roll my eyes because I know she has more to say. “What?” I snap.

She pops her eyebrows at my attitude and presses her lips together. “You’re in a good place. Even if I think you’re capable of more, I’m proud of how far you’ve come—how much you’ve grown up. I don’t want to see you...” Her exhale is so sharp it could slice through a watermelon with ease. “Get lost again.”

“I know,” I say. My tone is completely devoid of sass or irritation because she makes a good point. When it all fell apart, Mom was there for me. When I was too weak to defend myself, she protected me. For that, I at least owe her some respect. “It’s just a hobby.”

“Okay. Good. Nothing wrong with just having fun,” she says. “Now, who wants a brownie?”

Dad and I both hesitate.

Mom’s a decent cook, but her baking is terrifying. Eggshells in the batter are the least of our concerns. She once

subbed baking soda for flour and she thinks orange juice is a perfectly acceptable substitution for milk, to add a little flavor.

Dramatically rolling her eyes, she says, “They are from a Ghirardelli box mix. I only had to add three ingredients. *Geez.*”

Reassured, Dad and I both dive for the plate of dessert. “Mom?” I ask through a chocolatey mouthful. “Is there milk here?”

“Yeah.” She nods enthusiastically. “I’ll go get some.” She plants a quick kiss on my forehead before darting up the stairs. I realize that I never treat my mom...like a mom. Never once have I asked her to get me milk, help me with my laundry, or hold me while I cried. I just don’t remember her having time for all that. She was always on the way to class, or her internship, or studying for a test. When she landed her dream job, I never saw her.

As soon as she’s out of earshot, I fix my gaze on Dad who is already on his second brownie. “Why would the answer be no?”

“Huh?” he asks through a full mouth.

“If Miles and I were involved...you wouldn’t work with him? Is this a protective dad kind of thing?”

He tosses the brownie back on the tray in irritation. “You know Reese...it fucking kills me that the album that pays the bills, established my career, got me all this damn recognition”—he looks around the basement at the framed awards—“was made with the piece of shit that sent my only daughter into depression. And there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing I could do to him. Nothing I could do for you. I’m not going down that path again. You shouldn’t either—don’t mix business and pleasure.”

“Dad...” *Fuck, after all this time...I still defend him.* “Please don’t hold grudges for me.” The truth is, Petey never hit me, cheated on me, or directly lied to me. He just woke up one day and wanted something different and I got hurt because I wanted things to stay the same. “I don’t want you to have



any regrets about what you and Petey built—because it was important, for both of you. Let’s just remember the good and try to forget the bad. Okay? It’s time to let all that go.”

“You really have grown up.” Leaning forward, he picks the brownie back up. “I’m proud of you,” Dad says before taking a big bite.

*Yeah...you know what? I’m proud of myself too.*

**twenty-one**

...

Why the hell did I decide to do this with a string mop? Straightening my back, I try to relieve the tension that's built from hunching over for so long. Looking around the main floor of The Garage, I grumble in agitation when I realize, even after all that work, I've only cleaned about half the main floor. I still need to mop the new stage Dad and his crew custom-built.

Normally, Lorren Family Construction sends a cleanup crew when they are done with renovations but seeing as they already donated too much of their time and materials, the least I can do is assume the clean-up efforts on my own.

Law's website designer needs to take pictures of the venue tomorrow, which means I have to get this place sparkling in a hurry. I also have to unpack all the new furniture that's still sitting on the loading deck before Sienna swings by tomorrow morning to stage the place.

Looking at the brown mop bucket water, I decide it's time to dump and refill, but in perfect timing an angel at the main entrance interrupts me.

"Hey, superstar!" Reese shouts from across the room.

"Superstar?" I ask but she doesn't answer. She just hurtles into my arms and plants sweet kisses all over my face. She rubs her nose against my facial hair and I pull away. "Sorry, I'm all sweaty."

"I don't care," she murmurs before she finds my lips. "I like when you're sweaty."

“Why are you in jeans and a T-shirt?” I pat her denim-covered ass. “Aren’t you working today?”

She smiles wickedly. “I haven’t done laundry in a while, and most of Quinn’s clothes have to be dry-cleaned. So, yesterday I very tactfully sent an email to my boss and told him casual Fridays would really help boost team morale.”

“Clever. And he bought that?”

“Ate that shit right up and sent an urgent memo to the team where he specifically thanked me and called me an ambassador for team health and happiness. *Ha!*”

“Win-win,” I say, smiling at her. “Want to take a break with me and grab a quick lunch?”

“We can’t,” she says with a beaming smile. “It’s speakers day. Dad’s already on his way.”

“Already?” She nods causing her blonde ringlets to dance around her face. I whip out my phone and send a quick text to Sedi telling him to wake his ass up and head over to The Garage. “I just told my DJ to meet us.”

“Hmm.” Reese squints her light brown eyes. “I would’ve liked final approval on the DJ. I have certain criteria that need to be met.”

I chuckle. “Listen, bossy, I’ve got it under control.”

“I’ll try him out and let you know if he can stay.” She winks. “By the way, you’re going to need to remove your hand from my ass when my dad gets here.”

“Obviously. Not exactly the first impression I want to make on my girlfriend’s dad.”

Reese’s face twists and I immediately regret my words. “Shit. Sorry, I shouldn’t assume.” We’ve slept together once. And I wouldn’t call the migraine fiasco an actual date. I’ve been waiting patiently through this busy-as-all-hell week until I can make it up to her this weekend. I just figured Reese and I were on the same page.

“You assumed right,” she says, pressing both her small hands against my cheeks. “But the only thing I want more than

to be your girlfriend is to see you make an album.”

“What?”

“I wanted to let it simmer for a bit, just to make sure Dad didn’t change his mind. But we talked on Sunday and...we’re ready to get started when you are.”

“You are just—” I can’t even finish my thought, I just smash my lips against hers, tasting her cherry Chapstick.

“Mhmm,” Reese mumbles into my mouth when my lips refuse to release hers, “none of this when my dad gets here.”

I force myself to pull away. “Yeah, so what’s that about? You’re not allowed to date?”

“Not *you*. Not someone Dad’s working with.” She holds her palm up. “I mean I’m *allowed to date*,” she mocks, “But Dad—Mac, to you—won’t work with you if we’re involved.”

“Oh,” I say my face falling. “Well, shit, that’s a shame. I was really excited about all this.” Her smile is guarded as she nods her head, her thick ponytail swaying side to side. I get the impression she doesn’t understand what I’m talking about, so I clarify. “The album, I mean. I would’ve loved to work with Mac, but you’re not something I’m willing to give up.”

Her jaw slackens as she looks through my eyes like she’s trying to see deeper. “You’re serious?”

“What?”

“You’d pick being with me over working with a producer who’s been credited on four Grammy wins?”

“Four?” I say teasingly, “Well, I didn’t know it was *four*. Sorry, Pumpkin, your ass is grass, now.” I chuckle as I watch her smile flatten. “Kidding. I’d pick you over winning a Grammy myself, Reese. You’re already really special to me.”

“That’s ...” Her face twists as she makes a weird expression. I kiss her forehead but the wrinkles don’t relax.

“What is this?” Using my pointer finger, I circle her face. “Is this your ‘I’m going to cry’ face?” I can’t help but chuckle a little as she scowls.

“Well don’t draw attention to it,” she grumbles, spinning around.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pull her against my chest, ignoring the fact I’m dusty and grimy. I whisper in her ear, “I’m just enjoying getting to know all your faces. You can cry around me.”

Spinning back around, her expression has settled. She’s smiling mischievously. “There’s nothing to cry about because you can have both. Dad thinks we should start with an EP. It’ll take a couple months or so to get five good songs together...”

“So, we uh...abstain for a couple months?”

She scoffs like I’m ridiculous. “*Uh, no.* We sneak around and lie our asses off for a couple months.”

“Just when I didn’t think I could want you more. In fact, speaking of sneaking around...I’ve really missed you all week.”

“I missed you too,” she says. “You’ve been busy.”

“I know. But I’m caught up and am looking forward to spending time with my secret girlfriend tonight.”

Seeing Reese was near impossible this week. I’ve literally been at The Garage sunup to sundown for the past few days. The new buyer wants to swing by next week to check out our progress before we settle the deal and Law and I have a lot riding on their investment.

“Sorry,” she says with a pout. “It’s Friday. Girls’ night. But tomorrow?”

“Oh, come on...”

“Don’t you give me sad eyes. You know the rules, I don’t cancel on my friends.”

“Fine.” I pump my eyebrows at her when a naughty idea crosses my mind. “We have a few minutes before your dad gets here, right?”

“A few...”

“And you keep bragging about this three-minute blow job.” Grabbing her hand, I try to lead her to the bathroom. “Don’t worry, I’ll wash up first.” She laughs heavily but plants her feet in place.

“Um, no, sir. That’s for special uses only. It’s a bartering tool.”

“Bartering tool?”

“Mhmm, for when I really want something you won’t give me.”

Trailing my finger over the slight slope of her forehead to the tip of her nose, I stop to look at the most beautiful woman I could’ve ever dreamt up. “The only way I won’t give you what you want is if I can’t. And even then, I’d kill myself trying.”

No sass. No snark. No funny comeback. Reese puts her hands on either side of my face and presses herself into my chest. “It’s a little scary how I believe everything you say, so easily.”

Leaning away, I find her eyes, my arm still wrapped around the smallest part of her waist. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve only been in one other relationship and I felt paranoid all the time. But with you, I don’t question things. When you tell me you’re working late, I believe you. When you say you care about me like you haven’t cared about anyone else before, I know you mean it. I really like you, Miles. And now that you have my trust—please don’t break it.”

I pull her closer into my body and tuck her hair behind her back so I can whisper in her ear. “I won’t. I promise.”

---

Add sound engineer to the list of jobs I will never, ever be able to do. Reese’s Dad, Mac, looks like an electrician as he weaves through endless audio cables. Reese and I occasionally shuffle across the stage to move a subwoofer two inches to the

left or right, but otherwise, we're basically sitting ducks, our feet dangling off the stage, as Mac sets up the sound system.

From what I understand, Mac is a bit of a savant when it comes to music engineering. He plays guitar and piano, can navigate a MIDI with his eyes closed, and is an expert at the technical aspects of mixing tracks. He also looks nothing like Reese. Never in a million years would I suspect this man who looks like a Benjamin Bratt body double is Reese's father. The only physical attribute they share is their curly hair.

"Reese, grab a mic," Mac says as he paces across the stage. "Let's try a little soundcheck."

Brushing off his dusty dark jeans, he looks to Sedi, who is still tinkering with his new equipment behind the DJ's booth. Sedi's like a kid in a candy store and has spent the past hour of setup staring at Mac like he's the second coming. Mac's track record is impressive. I was already in awe when I found out he worked on *Depth*, Petey's debut album, but that was the tip of the Grammy iceberg.

"Where do you want me?" Reese asks pointing to the four corners of the stage, one by one.

Mac flashes her his teeth in an innocent smile. "I don't know yet. Grab a mic. Sing something."

Reese rolls her eyes. "Dad. Drop it."

Looking at me, Mac points to Reese. "The girl has the voice of an angel but never wants to sing. Five-octave range \_\_\_"

"Four and change," Reese interrupts, shaking her head.

"She's just modest," Mac explains. "She could sing circles around the greatest."

I try to speak to Reese casually in front of her dad like she's just a friend—and not a woman I'm falling head over heels for. "Why don't you like to sing? Stage fright?"

"No." Reese widens her eyes as she approaches me and Sedi by the DJ booth. "Not at all. I love attention." She winks.



“I just prefer the songwriting process. I love the studio. I want to create music, not necessarily perform it.”

“Such a waste,” Mac mutters as he shifts a subwoofer on the far side of the stage.

Ignoring him, Reese continues, “My friend Noa is an amazing cook and baker. She makes this chocolate coconut Hawaiian pie—it’s better than sex.” I narrow my eyes at her and she shrugs as she glances at Mac who has crossed the stage and is now out of earshot. “Sorry, it’s *comparable* to good sex.”

“Uh-huh...” I flatten my expression.

“Anyway, she’s phenomenal in the kitchen, and she loves to cook, but she’s not planning on opening a restaurant, you know? Sometimes you can like something, be great at it, but not have to *do* something about it.”

“I understand.” I fight the urge to tuck her hair behind her ear. Actually, I’m fighting a lot of urges. Don’t touch her. Don’t flirt. Don’t even get too close. It’s only been an hour and I’m already annoyed with keeping *us* under wraps. “Now I really need to try this pie.”

“I might be able to talk Noa into a little baking this weekend.”

Mac hops off the stage and lands with a loud thud. “The subs are fine. I’m more worried about an echo. The ceilings are high. I’m going to head up to the second level, then work my way down.”

The upper level was my favorite spot in The Garage when I used to catch shows here. I loved the level two seating. The tickets were pricier, but it was like having a bird’s eye view of the musician and the sound quality was still phenomenal. One of Reese’s few—okay, *many*—suggestions for the reopening was to keep the tradition of the elevated VIP section.

“How about we test the subs with the mic?” Sedi says, tinkering with his laptop, pulling up a few tracks.

“Thank you.” Reese smiles sweetly as he hands her the microphone.

“My lady,” Sedi says with a cheesy head bow. The fucker hasn’t stopped smiling like an idiot at Reese since he arrived. Jokes aside, best friend or not, if he keeps flirting with my girl, I’ll seriously kill him and then pretend to cry at his funeral.

“I heard you like Usher,” Sedi says, clicking the mouse as the intro to “New Flame” blasts through the speakers.

“Unhealthily obsessed,” Reese replies with a serious expression. “I’m considering therapy.” She keeps a steady face as long as she can before we both burst out in laughter. Spinning around, she walks the perimeter of the stage, toggling between mumbling and shouting, “Test, test.”

I’m a little let down. Now I’m curious. I want to hear her sing.

Once Mac is back on the main floor and gives her the thumbs up, she clicks off the mic and the music fades away. “They sound good all around. You should be all set.” He looks at Sedi. “Feel free to call me if you ever need help.” Looking at me, he continues, “And I imagine I’ll be seeing you sometime soon?” Mac holds out his hand for me to shake.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh,” he says scrunching his face. “*No*, to ‘*sir*’ please. That makes me feel annoyingly old.”

I laugh, realizing where Reese gets her snark. “Sorry... *Mac*. I’m ready when you are. Just tell me where to be and what to bring.”

“Just bring the songs you’ve written. We’ll go from there.”

Reese studies me as she approaches. Laying the mic down carefully on the DJ booth, she asks, “You guys chummy yet?”

“The chummiest.” Mac winks. “All right, your mom is here to pick me up, but Reese can let me know when you’re coming by. Any day works, just not Wednesdays after four. I have my meeting.”

Reese nods with a warm smile. “Still going to those?”

“It’s kind of a once you’re in, *you’re in* type of situation.” I’m not sure if they think they’re being subtle, but it’s obvious

they are talking about AA. Reese mentioned Mac just finished up a prison stunt for a drunk fender bender.

“Uh, Mr. Mac,” Sedi blubbers, “can I walk you out? I just have a couple of questions...professional questions.” Never once in my years of knowing Sedi have I seen him act so unsmooth and nervous. I guess Mac is to Sedi what someone like Petey is to me. An idol.

“Sure.” Mac nods over his shoulder. “Come on.” Sedi eagerly shuffles around the DJ booth, nearly tripping over a cord and his own two feet.

“That’s a fast friendship,” I say, watching them leave.

“Dad’s a good mentor. Sedi could probably learn a lot from him.”

“Sounds like it.”

“You could learn a lot from him too,” she says. Her eyes brighten like an idea just popped into her head.

“I don’t doubt it. I can’t wait. I have to spend most of the weekend getting this place ready to go, but I’ll be more free next week.”

“What’s the rush? There’s still over a month before opening.”

I lean against the DJ table. “Marketing obligations. Then, on Monday, Law and I have a meeting with the potential new buyer of this place. They want to check it out before they officially commit.” Reese puckers her bottom lip. “No...don’t do that,” I say wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her between my legs. “You know it’s not my call.”

“This used to be my favorite place in the world and you’re going to sell it to some rich suit who doesn’t give a shit about the actual magic of The Garage. They’ll probably never step foot in here except to pick up revenue checks.”

“I’m pretty sure they can collect those digitally.”

She scowls. “You’re furthering my point. *You* should keep this place. Hire me. I’ll run it if you don’t want to. I’ll turn my resignation into Henley tomorrow.”

“And what about your benefits? Hm? Because Law is not going to invest in medical, dental, and a 401k for bartenders and stage crews.” I kiss the top of her head. “Keep your job, baby. Plus, I thought we were frying bigger fish with this album, right?”

She glances around the main floor and lets out a pitiful sigh. “Fine.” She touches her lips to mine, briefly. “You really did a great job by the way. It looks exactly the same...just cleaner and herpes-free.”

I nod my head dramatically. “That was one of our main objectives. Fix the stage, repair the bathrooms, new kitchen appliances, and get rid of the STDs.”

“Smart move.” She chuckles against my lips.

With a quick look over her shoulder to ensure the coast is clear, she kisses me like she means business. Opening my mouth, I taste her tongue and match her enthusiasm as I wedge my hand under the wire of her bra. I pinch her nipple hard and she squeals. “Sorry, too much?” I ask, raising my brows at her.

“No, but if you keep touching me like that, I’m going to have to pull you backstage.”

I roll her nipple between my thumb and finger again, showing her exactly what’s on my mind, but she steps away and readjusts her bra. “My lunch break’s been over. I have to get back to work.”

I smirk. “Since when do you care about being late to work?”

“Since my”—she lowers her voice—“*boyfriend* reminded me my boring legal job is the only way to keep my benefits.”

She takes a step backward and my growing hard-on protests. “Stay. Call in sick.”

“They saw me an hour ago and I was fine.”

“Please?”

“Bye, Miles. Next week, okay? Let’s say Tuesday after I’m off work. I’ll text you Dad’s address.”

“Reese.” I give her my most stern look. “Stay.”

She sticks her tongue out before she hops off the stage, purposely swaying her hips as she walks away. She *knows* I’m watching her leave. “You could spare three minutes!” I call after her. She doesn’t turn around but I hear her playful laugh.

“Bye, baby,” she says waving over her shoulder.

And with that, she disappears from my sight.

“Little tease,” I mumble with a smile on my face to no one but myself.

**twenty-two**

...

I'm in such a blissful mood with everything coming together with Miles and my dad that I'm humming to myself. I'm so lost in my thoughts as I fish for my keys, that I almost don't notice the only other man sitting in the resident's lounge.

"Reese."

One word...

My name on his lips...

That's all it takes to make the hair on the back of my neck rise angrily, and a knot to instantly form in my empty stomach. I take a step back and spin slowly in front of the elevators in my building to see him holding a thick bouquet of flowers in one hand, his other hand up in a gesture of surrender.

*Holy shit.*

"Petey." I clear my throat loudly, trying to cover the furious thud in my chest. I'm not sure if the waves of nausea ache are nerves, anger...exhilaration. Perhaps it's a combination of all three.

"Hey," he says, his light eyes looking wet, like he's about to cry. I can't help but stare. I'll admit—Petey's dark skin contrasting with his extremely light honey-brown eyes is one of the first reasons I noticed him all those years ago. His eyes are such a peculiar color. You stare into them trying to figure out the odd hue and before you know it—bam. It's too late. You're in his trap...you're in love. "Why are you down here?"

He looks around. "You mean in the lobby?"

“Yeah. You obviously know my apartment number.” I can’t believe he’d risk someone seeing him in the lobby. It’d take one tweet and then he’d instantly be in a swarm of gropey fangirls and autograph requests.

“I didn’t want to ambush you.” He takes a step forward. “If you want me to go, I’ll go right now.”

I should tell him to go, but I’m having trouble breathing at the moment. Petey’s a memory from the most beautiful, yet ugliest moment of my life. And here he is...right in front of me...dredging up the past. Wearing dark wash jeans and a simple logo-free T-shirt, he looks so *normal*.

I’m silent, frozen in place. When I don’t respond, he continues. “You blocked me from everything. I had no way of talking to you.”

“Paints a pretty clear picture, right?” *There it is*. I was caught off guard, but the snarky girl in me is back—and she’s got some shit to say.

“I didn’t know how to reach out to you. I texted you. I even created a fake account to message you on Instagram. I sent flowers. I...uh...”

“It’s been three years, Petey. *Three whole years* to come up with something a little more impressive than DMs and calling in flowers from across the country.”

He shrugs and a puff of his cologne dances in the space between us. *Dammit, I still love that smell*. His signature cologne. It sold like fucking hotcakes. They couldn’t keep it in stock. “I’ve been on tour.”

I nod and for a moment he looks relieved, like I’m actually about to let him off the hook. *A wrong assumption*.

“My dog ate my homework. I lost your number. My great aunt Maureen on my father’s side, who I never met, *died* and I’m really struggling to get through it.”

His dark brows cinch in confusion. “What?”

“Oh, sorry,” I snark, “I thought we were listing off *bullshit* excuses.”



“Okay.” He ducks his head and lightly laughs. “I deserve that. Whatever you need to get off your chest, I promise you, I’ll listen. I’ll take it all. No more excuses, just apologies.”

I so badly want to ignore the sincerity in his expression. I used to have dreams about this moment—the day Petey would come groveling back. But right now, it seems like more of a nightmare. He looks sad.

*Why do I still worry when he looks sad?*

It’s not healthy. We shouldn’t be near each other.

“Where’s your little guard dog?” I pretend to look around the lobby. “Or is he herding up the groupies?” I can’t remember the last time I saw Petey without his fast-talking manager, Parker. He was always so perky and yappy, like a Chihuahua puppy. If I miss anything about Atlanta, it’s Parker.

“He died.”

Inhaling sharply, my legs go rigid and my mouth instantly dries. I try to speak but no words come out. I have to clear my throat and try again. “*What?*”

“Early last year. A car accident. He uh...held on for a little bit, but after a few weeks, the doctor said he likely wouldn’t make it out of the coma. His family decided to...” Petey can’t even finish the words. His eyes shift to the tall Ficus in the corner of the lounge.

I tent my hands over my nose and mouth right as a hot tear streaks my cheek. “Oh my God...I didn’t know.” Another tear follows. “What kind of car accident? Was he in pain? I don’t... *shit*. Petey, I had no idea.” I try to blink but my eyelids seem frozen, wide open in shock.

“How would you know? When you left, you didn’t just leave me, you know? You shut out a lot of people. I don’t know who could’ve told you.”

“So, it’s my fault? *Don’t you dare—*”

“That’s not what I meant.” He takes another step forward and I flinch when he touches my shoulder. “I meant...I didn’t know if you would’ve cared to know.”

“Parker was my friend too,” I whisper. “Of course, I’d want to know.”

But the guilt seeps in because I certainly wasn’t acting like a friend. Parker tried to reach out to me a few times after Petey and I officially cut things off, but I was mourning and lost. I didn’t want anyone to see me like that and report it back to Petey. Parker even traveled through Denver a couple of years ago and asked if I wanted to meet for lunch. I didn’t bother responding. I had a new life and he was attached to Petey’s hip. I didn’t see the point of blurring lines.

“I’m sorry,” I say. When I peel my gaze from the floor, I look up to see Petey’s eyes are watering too. “You must really miss him.”

“Yeah,” he says with a heavy breath. “It took me a minute to come back from that one. I uh...sang at his funeral.”

My eyes, which had settled, widen again. “You sang? What?”

“The Band Perry.” His cheeks bunch but his tan skin covers the red embarrassment rising in his face. “Country of all things. It was awful, but I think Parker would’ve liked it.”

“Of course he would’ve. Damn, I wish I could’ve heard that. You have a great singing voice, Petey. Parker and I always tried to get you to pull a Drake and do both—rap and sing. You’d be great.” I suddenly register that I’m smiling, and I’m annoyed at myself for it.

“You told me a lot of stuff.” Petey hands me the thick bouquet of tulips. It took a lot of wasted dollars at the floral shop, but he finally got it right. Purple tulips are my kryptonite. “I should’ve listened.”

For a moment, there’s nothing but the sound of crinkling plastic as I nervously cinch the bottom of the bouquet in my hand. My thoughts are running rampant in opposite directions.

*Go.*

*Stay.*

*Leave this building, right now.*

*Come upstairs.*

“You look really good, Reese. Better than a dream.” Petey’s smile is earnest but it’s laced with hidden motivation. It’s all part of his sneaky charm.

“I think that’s where we belong,” I say firmly.

“What’s that?” he asks, his face pulling in concern. He looks nervous like he’s hanging on my every word. It’s funny, I’m in plain jeans and a raggedy T-shirt but I seem to have this man wrapped around my pinky at the moment. All those years of getting done up, obsessing about my looks, and he didn’t seem to notice me. Even when Petey and I were together, I felt like I was fighting all the other women in the world for his attention.

Taking in a breath, I reflect on all the nights I went home alone. All the times Petey chose his boys over me. When making love turned into quickie fucks. I remember why I had to leave. Why I had to cut him and his lifestyle out entirely.

“We’re better in dreams, Petey. *Us? Together in real life?* It’s a nightmare.”

He rubs his hand over his neck, grazing his freshly trimmed neckline. His eyes shift like he’s uncomfortable. “Yeah...Reese, I’m sorry, I think you’re misunderstanding.”

“What?” My eyes lock on his. He seems to shrink in place.

“These are just apology flowers. I should’ve been a better boyfriend at the time, and a friend throughout. I always wanted the chance to apologize to you in person. I have a lot of guilt about how childish I acted at the time. I am *truly* sorry. You deserved better, and you still do. But um...that’s all this is—just an apology. I’m not trying to get you back.”

My mouth falls open stupidly. “I saw your messages on Instagram—”

“Another apology I owe you. It was just drunken nights in the studio and old emotions flooding in. I was a little out of it and feeling vulnerable. I would’ve deleted them; I didn’t think you even saw them.”

*The great Petey Pete the Sneak—vulnerable.* Hm...

“Okay then, I’m officially embarrassed. I thought—”

“You’ll always have a special place in my heart, Reese. I probably would be here on bended knee begging you to take me back if I wasn’t in love”—his eyes shift nervously—“and engaged.”

“*Engaged?*” My voice cracks.

“It’s recent.”

“Wow.” Sue me. It hurts. Petey never entertained the idea of marrying me. I wonder what kind of woman could get through to him. I try to hand back the flowers. “Congrats. I don’t think your fiancée would like you giving another woman flowers.”

Refusing to take them back he says, “It was her idea. I’m trying to make amends for a lot of stupid stuff I’ve done. She thinks it’ll help inspire me again.”

The way his tone drops, I know what he’s saying. “Are you struggling to write again—” I stop myself and bite my bottom lip. My heart jolts alive, the way it always has when Petey needs me. But I’m not his to need anymore. There’s a different leading man who needs my support these days. “Sorry, not my business. Um, thank you. These are nice. I like these better than the others you sent because they’re simple.”

He chuckles, his face landing in a knowing smirk. “By the way, I know you refused the other deliveries. The little kid from Luxy’s Floral finally ratted you out after I wasted literally thousands of dollars there.” *Harry*. I chuckle to myself picturing him as the Robin Hood of luxury floral bouquets. I wonder who he gifted my flowers to.

“Well, that’s what you get for breaking my heart. I waste your money.”

He doesn’t laugh with me, he just stares at his designer sneakers. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s a joke, Petey.”

“Can you ever forgive me?”

I hold up the flowers. “Today, I’m a little bit closer.” I give him a clipped smile, then relax my lips. “Look, I’m in a good place. So, don’t worry, okay? And truly—congrats.”

“Thank you.” He blows out a long breath. “I hope your dad is just as forgiving.”

Feeling multiple buzzes from my back pocket, I pull out my phone and check my friends’ group messages.

**Addie:** Pieces, samosa order is under Sassy V. Gyna. Should be four boxes.

**Me:** \*eye roll emoji\* You guys are obnoxious.

**Addie:** Sorry. Mani made me.

**Mani:** \*laughing emoji\*

After checking the time, I tuck my phone back into my pocket. “I have to run upstairs. I’m already late to meet my friends. Sorry, what did you say about my dad?”

“He’s next on the apology tour.”

“Petey, you have nothing to apologize to Mac for.” He follows me to the elevator. After pressing the up button, I spin around. “Unless I’m missing something?”

“No, but I can’t imagine he’s too thrilled with me after you and I broke up.” *You mean after you dumped me?* “He cashes his checks, but he doesn’t talk to me.”

The whirring of my building’s elevator kicks up and I mentally debate whether I’m going to invite Petey to walk me to my door. Somehow that feels like crossing a line. I know too well what it feels like to be the woman worried at home.

“What do you need to talk to him about?”

“Word is he’s out of prison for good?” I nod in response. “And sober?”

I nod again. “He’s doing really well...and my parents are together.”

“What?” he squalls in surprise as his eyes pop. *Finally, someone who gets it.*

“Weird right?”

“Hella weird. But anyway, my contract with my label is up. I’m not making another album for Elite Records with their tired-ass producers.”

For the third time during this conversation, my jaw drops. “You’re leaving Elite?”

“Left.” Petey shrugs. “There’s no bad blood. I’ve made them enough money. I want to start doing things my way again. I thought me and Mac could get back into the studio. But uh...I don’t know if he’s willing to work with me again.”

The elevator dings and I hesitate as the doors peel open. Petey looks just as torn as I feel.

*Stay or go...*

*Should I...shouldn't I...*

I step inside the elevator, then turn to face him. “I’ll talk to Dad.”

“You don’t have to.”

I hold up the flowers. “Consider it a return peace offering. Just give me a couple days. How long are you in town?”

“A while.”

“Okay, I’ll let you know what he says.”

“You’ll text me?”

“Sure.” Instinctively, I kick out my foot to catch the elevator doors from closing and cutting off our conversation.

He half smiles. “You’ll have to unblock my number to do that.”

I let out a huff of a laugh. “Right.” I whip out my phone and head to my blocked contacts, feeling a little embarrassed about my petty behavior. But cutting Petey out of my life wasn’t to hurt him...it was to protect me from myself. “There. Done.” I wave my phone in the air.

Pointing into the elevator, Petey asks, “Do you want me to walk you up?”

I pause and ask myself the same question. *Up or down...*

“Nah, I’m okay. Let’s just leave it here.”

“All right. Thank you,” Petey says as he holds out his hand. We shake hands like this is a business deal but I can’t help but notice how his thumb briefly rubs over my knuckles tenderly. It’s a nudge from the past. From a time when I used to crave his attention and affection. For some reason, today, the craving is a little less potent.

“Thank *you*,” I say as the elevator beeps in protest, demanding I remove my foot and either go up or get out.

“For what?”

I suck in a deep breath and let my vulnerability unleash. “For apologizing and expecting nothing in return.”

Removing my foot, the door closes on Petey’s tender smile. *Hmm, that’s strange.* There must be ghosts among us. Because that smile looked a whole lot like the Petey I used to know. Before the lights. Before the fame. Before the industry twisted up his heart.

After another glaring ding, the elevator releases me. I’m walking to my apartment door when I feel another few buzzes come from my back pocket. I grumble in irritation, deadset on telling my friends that we could just have these conversations in person...at girls’ night...which I’m already late for.

**Petey:** Did this go through?

**Me:** Yes.

**Petey:** \*winking face\* Just checking.

**Me:** \*eye roll emoji\*

**twenty-three**

...



“Did he take it like a man when you punched him in the throat?” Mani asks as she dunks the corner of her curry-filled pastry in a plastic cup of clear broth. She pops the rest of the samosa in her mouth before bunching her fingers together and kissing the tips in the universal chef’s kiss sign. “What is this new dipping sauce they’re putting in orders? I could drink this stuff.”

I blink at her. “I didn’t punch Petey in the throat.”

“Missed opportunity,” Noa grumbles from across the room.

“Agreed,” Mani says to Noa before pointing her finger at me, her bright yellow polish still visible in dim lighting. “We’re not going to let you get sucked back in.”

“Sucked back where?” I ask. “Right in between him and his fiancée?”

“Would you put it past him? I don’t care what the official record says, he cheated. You guys”—Mani makes air quotes with her fingers—“were on a break when you moved home. You made new friends and worked on yourself. *He* stuck his dick in every groupie like he had a mystery key and wasn’t sure which mailbox belonged to him.” Pinching her fingers, as if she’s holding a fictitious key, Mani stabs at the air and twists her wrist.

Barely lifting my eyes from my lap, I give Mani my most unimpressed expression. “Well, that’s a visual no one needs.”

“Reese, how do you feel about everything? Honestly?” Noa asks as she scowls at the cat in her lap purring so loud it sounds like someone parked a Ford F150 in the middle of girls’ night. Actually, Felices’s Savannah cat size means he can take up two and a half laps. He’s sort of draped over her like a throw blanket. “Addie, I think your cat is trying to mate with me.”

Addie snorts. “Oh, yeah,” she says, nodding at the furry heap that’s nuzzled so deep into Noa’s lap that it looks painful. “He’s absolutely putting the moves on you. Last week his obsession was Quinny, this week you’re up. What can I say? My cat’s a little slutty.”

“Wow,” Noa mumbles, but pats his head anyway, letting him lounge on her in peace.

“I’m fine, honestly,” I interject.

“You’re fine?” Quinn asks, making a disapproving noise from her seat to my left.

“What?” My snappy tone is fully intended. I know that noise. I also know I’m about to hear a lecture I probably don’t want to.

“Okay,” she says, pairing it with an exasperated sigh. Snatching the remote off the coffee table, she pauses our show right in the middle of a particularly randy sex scene on the screen. *Nice*. Of all the characters in *Sex and the City*, Samantha resonates with me the most. Not because I want to be her kindred spirit, but because I’m worried that’s exactly where I’ll be in my forties if I don’t figure out what I want from a relationship. “You meet Miles, you sleep with Miles, then your dad says you can’t be with Miles if you want them to make an album. That’s already a mind game in itself, but then enter Petey, who is buying you flowers and obsessed with getting your forgiveness...yet he’s *engaged*? Reese, none of this makes sense. Your head must be spinning. Why are you trying to play cool around *us*?”

“I’m not playing anything. I’m actually fine. Look!” I hold up my palms. “I’ve spent so much time hurt about Petey, angry at Petey, trying to shut Petey out. It’s just been *Petey, Petey,*

*Petey* for the past fucking decade of my life. I'm sick of it. And I thank my lucky stars I met Miles before finding out *Petey's* engaged. I'll admit, it softens the blow a little bit because, for the first time, I can kind of picture a happy ever after...with someone else."

"I get that," says a low grumbly male voice. We all whip our heads around to see Joel, not in his usual working-late Friday attire—neat slacks and a semi-wrinkled dress shirt. He's in sweats and a T-shirt, with a beer in hand, watching us from the kitchen. "What?" he asks, looking at all our bewildered expressions.

"I thought you like to work late on Fridays?" Quinn asks. "You've been here the whole time?" Usually, we only see Joel as he's getting home. He grabs a snack and makes himself scarce until we leave.

"Baby," Addie singsongs, "it's girls' night. You're supposed to be heading out. Where's Cody?"

"With Sawyer," Quinn answers for Joel. Normally, Quinn's husband and Addie's fiancé are attached at the hip, but Cody's been spending more quality time with Quinn's younger brother lately—just worming his way permanently into her family's heart.

Joel tips the bottom of his beer bottle to the ceiling. "*Oh, come on.* I live here. You guys can't kick me out of my own home *every* Friday night."

It is kind of mean. Joel is the biggest homebody I've ever seen, second only to his fiancée. If he's not traveling for work he likes to be comfortable at home, and for about the past two months, we've been forcing him to either hide or actually go out and participate in the world on Friday nights.

I snort and scooch over on the couch, leaving plenty of space to my left. "Come on, Money Bags, you're officially invited to girls' night."

"Thank you, *Pieces,*" Joel emphasizes, borrowing Addie's nickname for me. After fetching another beer from the fridge,

he plops down on the couch next to me and hands me the cold brew.

“So, you heard the whole story, then?” I ask him.

Pulling his glasses off, he tosses them onto the table. “Tried not to, but your guys’ voices carry.”

“Meaning you were eavesdropping.”

“Yup. Sue me. I was bored locked up in my dungeon back there.” Jutting his thumb over his shoulder, he gestures to the long hallway that leads to his and Addie’s bedroom.

“Dungeon? Our bedroom has a minibar, a sitting area, and a theatre sound system hooked up to the TV,” Addie says with a chuckle as she cuddles their youngest cat baby, Kitty.

As a welcoming gesture, I grab the Styrofoam container sitting on the coffee table and offer Joel the last samosa. It’s the least I can do. Luxury bedroom or not, we do commandeer this man’s penthouse weekly. “So, you agree? It doesn’t make me look pathetic to talk to my dad about working with Petey again?”

“Nah,” Joel says as he ruffles my hair annoyingly. He takes a big bite of the airy puff pastry and covers his mouth as he continues, “You know last time I was in New York for work, I saw my ex—Juliana. She’d heard in the rumor mill that Adler and I are engaged. I ran into her at this coffee house, and I’m expecting her to pull out a Chinese throwing star and aim right for my forehead. But instead, she hugs me. *Platonically.*” He winks at Addie across the room.

“Why?” I furrow my eyebrows at this strange admission.

“Juliana and I broke up because she wanted to get married and have kids. I thought I didn’t want those things...until I found the right girl.” He takes another bite of the samosa and swallows quickly. “Juliana told me she’s now happily married, has a stepson, and she’s pregnant. She got everything she ever wanted.” Joel points across the room to his fiancée. “And so did I. We just had to get out of each other’s way because we weren’t meant to be. Once you’re *truly* happy, there’s no reason to hate each other anymore. Whatever you guys went

through is just part of the journey that got you to where you needed to be.”

The entire room is awkwardly silent as we all just blink at Joel. “What?” he says, holding up his hands. “Guys can have emotional maturity...”

I pat his knee. “I like that sentiment. Anger is heavy. I’m tired of carrying it.”

Joel nods. “Good for you, Pieces.”

“Okay, *stop*,” Addie growls. “That’s *my* nickname for Reese. Consider it trademarked. You can’t use it.”

“Oh, ho, ho, sweetheart.” Holding up his left hand, he points to his ring finger. “You’re wearing the diamond. What’s mine is yours...and I get to use all your best friends’ nicknames. Right, Nono?” He glances at Noa who is pulling a strand of cat hair off her tongue as Felices stretches in her lap again. “Hey, aren’t you allergic to cats?”

“Slightly,” Noa says. “But after tonight, I’m going to have to go home and bathe in Benadryl.” She strokes Felices’s furry head anyway.

I proceed to un-pause our episode of *Sex and the City*. Mani says something before Joel shushes her, claiming he hasn’t seen this episode. He’s met again with a round of judgmental stares, which he ignores. I, however, have nearly every episode memorized, so I pull out my phone.

**Me:** Do you like *Sex and the City*?

**Miles:** ... Um, please tell me how I’m supposed to answer that.

**Me:** Ha. Want to come to girls’ night next week and meet my friends?

**Miles:** I’m invited?

**Me:** I can put in a good word.

**Miles:** I’d love to meet your friends.

**Miles:** And will tolerate the show.

**Me:** \*winking emoji\* Okay, superstar. Go polish your songs. We have a lot of work to do next week.

**Miles:** Did I say thank you?

**Me:** Probably, but for what?

**Miles:** Taking a chance on me. Believing in someone is a choice.

**Me:** Well, I choose you.

**Me:** And you're welcome.

I turn my phone to silent and toss it on the table face down so I'm not *that* friend, texting all night. I don't need to be glued to my phone during a night apart from Miles. The paranoia, the questions, the insecurity... It just isn't there with him. I put my phone away feeling at peace, unworried that he's throwing our relationship away tonight. I don't feel the need to check in and show up as if I could prevent something disastrous from happening.

I'm not sure if letting Miles in or letting Petey go was the solution, but I'm more certain than ever that when I fall asleep tonight, for the first time in umpteen years...

I'm only going to dream about one man.

**twenty-four**

...

“I don’t think you needed to bring a giant-ass cookie to seal the deal, Sienna.”

“Hush,” Sienna says with a hiss. “Everyone loves a good cookie cake. It can’t hurt.” She shuffles around the rectangular table that’s covered in a long black cloth. Sienna went out of her way to make The Garage look far fancier than it needs to be. It looks like we’re preparing to host a small wedding versus a meeting with the buyer.

Sienna fusses with the napkins, ensuring there’s a little plate and pen in front of each place setting. She even brushes off Law’s shoulders, trying to make his pristine suit look tidier. He catches her hand. “Why are you so nervous, baby?”

“Because if this falls through, I have a feeling we won’t have the time for that trip to France you promised me.”

I flash her a wide smile, loosening the tie that’s choking me. I’m twenty-six and still don’t know how to fasten these properly. “France, huh? The Louvre?”

Sienna beams and nods enthusiastically. “We’re going to try and make a baby in Paris.” Wrapping her arms around Law from behind, she kisses Law’s cheek.

*Oh, God. You’re going to give your kid a pretentious French name, aren’t you?*

“So, you guys...talked?” I squint one eye at Sienna, wondering how much Law knows about her reluctance to become a mom before she crossed a few items off her bucket list.



Law clears his throat. “You’ll have the place to yourself a lot because Sienna and I are going to prioritize traveling this year.” He looks at his wife and gives her a sweet smile. “But you know if and when we do have a little one, it doesn’t have to stop. I want you to see the world, baby. I want to *give* you the world. All you have to do is ask.”

Sienna winks at me as a wide, genuine smile spreads across her face. “We talked.”

“Good for you guys. And as generous as your offer is, as soon as I have a few paychecks under my belt, I think I’m going to look for my own place.”

“You don’t ha—”

“I know,” I say, cutting off Sienna’s protests. “I know I’m welcome to stay. Thank you. But I want my own place.”

“Are we not good enough hosts?” She twists her lips.

“Don’t you want your space back?”

“We have over six-thousand square feet, Miles. There’s plenty of space. And your company is way better than those country club bitches.”

I snicker at how much Sienna hates hosting weekly book clubs. She pretends to read the high-minded philosophical crap that her fellow rich trophy wife friends insist on, but she just scours the synopsis. She spends her actual time reading dirty romance novels and *People* magazine.

“I appreciate you guys, but need *my* space, especially if I’m staying in Denver. It’s time to figure out a long-term plan...which shouldn’t involve your basement.”

Law looks over his shoulder at Sienna. “He has a new girlfriend. She slept over while we were in Colorado Springs. I’m sure it’s where all this is coming from.”

“*What?*” Sienna squawks. “That was fast.”

“I need you guys to keep that under wraps for now. Her dad agreed to produce an EP for me, and he’s made his opinion on us dating pretty clear.”

“What’s an EP?” Sienna asks.

“Just a little smaller than an album. Five or so songs. I’ve been trying to get signed by a label so they can fund an album, but Reese thinks I should trudge forward on my own—take my music right to the listeners instead of waiting on gatekeepers. She calls it the indie revolution.”

Law nods. “Smart girl.”

“Yeah, she’s somethin’ else.”

Sienna studies my expression. “Oh, you’re whipped, my friend.”

“So whipped,” I grumble. “I’d rip the shirt off my back immediately to catch her sneeze. This girl is…” I let out a low whistle. “So far out of my league, I’m already worried about the day someone snakes her from right up under me.”

“Let’s hope you’d put up a fight,” Law says. “Oh, hey—I heard the door.”

Sienna takes a seat, then quickly stands again. “Wait, should I go? Do you guys want me here, or I can duck backstage?”

“Sit down, honey,” Law says with confidence. “My business is your business. You’re always welcome where I am.”

I need to start carrying a notepad around to write down all these Lawrence money lines. Maybe it’s his age, but the man knows how to speak to his wife.

Sienna wiggles her fingers. “I don’t normally get star-studded, but all the secrecy is killing me. I wonder who the hell this celebrity buyer is. I really hope it’s Joanna Gaines and she goes Fixer Upper all over this place.” She glances at Law’s perturbed expression. “What? This place could use some country-rustic charm. And there’s no law saying you can’t hold concerts *and* weddings at the same venue—”

“I think it’s Petey,” I say in a low whisper.

“The rapper? Why do you think that?”

“*Because it’s Petey at the entrance.*” Sienna follows my stare. I blink a few times, trying to ensure my eyes aren’t playing tricks. No, I’ve seen him so many times in concert. I recognize his silhouette. That’s fucking Petey Pete the Sneak with two other people walking toward us.

“I’m sorry we’re late.” The brunette with the noisiest stilettos power walks toward us, the rest of her landing party dragging behind.

I nearly knock over my chair as I shoot to my feet. Law rises to greet her far more smoothly. He extends his hand. “You’re not late. We said *around* three o’clock.” His voice changes into a confident, booming drawl—his business voice. “It’s Ms. Rosen, right?”

She takes his hand, then mine. “Delilah’s fine. But yes, I represent Peter.” She holds her palm up as Petey and another person finally arrive in front of us. *Be cool, be cool, be fucking cool, Miles.* “This is Jacob—with Primrose Realty. And of course, Peter Mills—the interested buyer.”

“Hey, y’all, thanks for meeting with us.” Petey smiles and takes the time to shake each of our hands, even Sienna’s. I’m not sure why I always pictured him off stage wearing a gold grill, in thick faux fur coats, with a permanent brandy in his right hand. This Petey looks so *normal*. He’s dressed down in a simple black collared shirt and jeans. No chains, no jewelry, just simple studs in his ears. His cornrows are neat and his beard, even shorter than mine, is very neatly trimmed. He looks like he belongs in an office, not on stage.

Petey points to the cookie in the center of the table. “Nice touch. Is that for everyone?”

Sienna beams, shooting me a snarky look. “Why yes, it is, Petey. Or Peter—sorry, what do you prefer?”

He chuckles. “I answer to both.”

“Okay, Peter, let me just cut you a slice.” She glances at Delilah. “For you too?”

Delilah turns up her nose and shakes her head. “No, thank you. I’m strictly Keto.” Petey and Jacob both roll their eyes at

some unspoken annoyance with her response.

“Does everyone want to take a seat?” Law gestures to the table. “I drafted up some financial projections. It’s hard to get an understanding of the business’s worth prior to opening, but I pulled some data from former years and crossed them with the current performance of a few other venues in a twenty-mile radius. There’s a piano bar about a mile North that has some decent numbers to go off of. We can talk about the feasibility of those projections as we try to agree upon a number.”

Petey’s face goes blank as he looks at Law like he just explained quantum mechanics to a toddler. “Uh...”

Reading the room, I step in. “Petey, I can walk you through the renovations while they talk numbers if you want?” I’d rather watch paint dry than discuss profit margins and financial projections. I get the impression Petey feels the same.

“Thank God,” he groans. “Yes, please.” He takes the little plate with the triangle chocolate-chip cookie slice Sienna offers him and says, “D, just give them whatever they want. I don’t care what it costs. I’ll pay anything for this place.”

Delilah presses her fingertips against her closed lids. “Worst negotiator ever,” she says through gritted teeth.

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“All of this has been rebuilt and restored.” I jump up and down in place on stage to demonstrate my point. “My dad and I fell through a weak spot, so we rebuilt it with extra reinforcement.”

“Looks great, man,” Petey says, checking out the four corners of the wooden stage. “You know when I was first starting out, I used to perform here.” He wears the same mystified expression that Reese wore the first time I met her. *What is it about this place?*

“Oh, I know.” I head to the back of the stage. Using my toe, I tap on the floorboards where Petey’s name is etched in

several locations. “We salvaged these when we rebuilt the stage.”

“*Damn.*” Staring at the boards, his lips twitch in a smile. “That was a lifetime ago. You saved these?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s history. There are all sorts of big names on this piece of wood. Maybe it’ll be good luck for the reopening.” Not that The Garage needs luck. This place bleeds magic, lucky energy. The girl of my dreams barged in over a month ago, and now my idol? I’m never locking those front doors again. “Look, I’m trying to keep it together, but *holy shit*—*you’re Petey.*”

“You’re a fan?”

*Superfan. Obsessed. Studied your come up and tried to replicate your success.* “Yeah, I’m a big fan.”

“Do you have a favorite song?” he asks. I’m assuming a lot of celebrities are liked simply because they’re famous. He doesn’t understand I listen to his music religiously.

“I don’t know if I have a favorite song.” He presses his lips together and nods his head, looking a little disappointed, but I continue, “Because the way you write your albums is so cohesive—they tell a story. How do you just pick one part of the story? *Depth* will always be my favorite album. I genuinely love every single song off that record. *Radar* is a close second, and my favorites from that record are ‘In the Fray’ and ‘Saw You Coming.’ Now, your most recent album, *Enigma*, I liked because it was so different. Trap music isn’t my usual taste, but the way you hosted all those collaborations...I’d say from *that* record, ‘Breathe Again’ is the song I listen to most.” I look at his surprised expression. “I could go on...”

Cupping his hand over mine, he pulls me into a brotherly hug and pats my shoulders a few times. “That’s fucking cool, man. Thank you. It means a lot, especially when fans seem few and far between these days. Word around town is I fell off.”

“*What?*” I can’t control my shrill defensiveness at the idea that my favorite rapper fell from grace. “Asshole haters.”

“Nah, there’s some truth to it. It’s been a minute since I’ve released anything I’m proud of. *Depth* is my favorite album too. You know—I wrote most of the album backstage, *here*. My producer used to spin here some nights. We’d sit backstage, smoke a little J, and just let the words spill out. I’ve done four stadium tours”—he glances around left to right—“this is still the best stage in the world.”

Shifting my weight, I examine the legend in front of me again. Strange...I always thought he was a little taller than me. I think I have him by an inch or so.

“Your producer for *Depth*—Mac, agreed to work with me on an EP. Any advice?”

He raises his dark brows. “Yeah? You rap?”

“I’m a singer.”

“Ah, that’s what’s up. Sorry man...Miles...I wish I could say I’ve heard of you.” He clenches his teeth together, in a pitiful expression.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I haven’t released anything. I was in L.A. just...” *What the hell was I doing in L.A.?* “I mostly sang covers and worked on demos, but I couldn’t get my hands on a deal.”

Petey scoffs loudly. “Please. Let me tell you something about labels. They don’t want what’s good—they want what sells. And the listeners eat that shit up because they don’t know better is out there. Fuckin’ rat wheel is what it is.” He shrugs. “And I know I sound like a hypocrite because financially I’ve benefited from that rat wheel, but doesn’t mean I like the politics.”

“Lonely at the top?” I ask.

“Exactly,” he says. “But that’s why I’m back home for a bit—straightening out my shit.” He points down to the stage. “I’m getting back to my roots, trying to find a way to love creating again. I just finished up my contract with Elite. I’m a

free agent, so I actually hit Mac up myself. He's been slow getting back to me."

"You guys don't work together anymore?"

"Mac produced for me when I was indie. After *Depth*, I signed my soul away to Elite Records. They had a list of approved producers and engineers. Mac wasn't one of them, so I moved on."

*Wait...you chose the deal over your friends?*

I look over Petey's shoulder at the business meeting happening across the room. It doesn't look like much business is going on. They're leaning back in their chairs, legs crossed, relaxed, and half of the cookie is gone. "I'm meeting with him in a couple days. Want me to mention you're back in town?"

"Nah, I'm straight man. I got someone working on it. But as for that advice..."

"Oh...yeah?"

"Mac's the greatest. End of story. I've worked with a lot of people in the industry. No one understands how to create great music like he does. So, whatever he asks of you, sit down, shut up, and just do it. Even when he's being a dick"—Petey rolls his eyes—"it's worth it. You won't regret it."

If Reese's endorsement wasn't enough, the words from one of the most successful hip-hop artists of this decade just confirmed I was handed a golden ticket. I have to be damn sure not to waste it. I suddenly feel a little more nervous, like there's not enough polishing in the world I could do to be worthy of Mac.

"Hey, can I poke around backstage?" Petey asks.

"Um, yeah? I mean, don't you own this place now?"

He cackles. "I haven't signed anything yet. But speaking of which, Delilah told me you're willing to stick around for a bit. To help me get this place off the ground and running. I'm buying it *for* someone—but it's a surprise. She's got a lot going on and I can't just dump a business on her. I don't have much time to run The Garage myself."

“Yeah, I can stick around for a while,” I say as I lead Petey backstage. “But out of curiosity, if neither of you has time to run a place like this, why buy it?”

“A gesture. This place means the world to her. I made a lot of mistakes. I’m trying to unravel a lot of bad choices, and I don’t know how else to show her how special she is to me. This is where we fell in love. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’d pay anything for this place.”

“Damn, man. That’s romantic. You know, my girlfriend was worried this place was going to fall into the wrong hands. But I think she’s going to love this story—that you bought it for love.” I almost tell Petey that he might remember Mac’s daughter. I think Reese mentioned she met him a time or two, but then I swallow my tongue when I remember that Petey’s trying to work with Mac again. Leave it to me and my big mouth to accidentally slip about our secret relationship and kill all chances for this album.

“She a fan too?” Petey asks as he makes his way to the far side of the room. “I’ll sign whatever you like for her so you can look like a hero.”

I chuckle. “Thanks—that might work if you sign it as Usher.”

Petey snorts as he yanks the new leather couch from the wall. “What is it with women and Usher, right? Outside of the obvious. Man is in his mid-forties and could probably still swipe your girl right from under you.”

“Right?”

“My girl is the same way.” Petey points to the bricks behind the couch and my stomach drops twenty floors as the realization sinks in. He outlines the heart with his fingers. “I painted this for her like ten years ago, right before a sold-out show here—to mark a memory.” He chuckles fondly. “Tacky, isn’t it? Young, dumb kids in love.”

I stare at the initials, remembering the conversation from the first time I met Reese and she showed me this same graffiti. I kept it because I thought it was charming. Now I



wish I would've smashed these bricks apart. I think back, trying to remember what she told me, and if she purposely kept this from me...

*“So, you must be RR. Who is PM?”*

*“Just puppy love...he’s long gone. But RR is indeed me. Reese Reyes.”*

“You’re PM?” I ask, nearly choking on my words.

“Yep. Peter Mills.”

“And RR is your girlfriend?”

“It’s complicated, but yeah.” Petey raises his brows at me. “That’s right, you said you were tight with Mac. It’s his daughter, Reese. You know her?”

I tuck my thumbs inside my fists as the sick feeling of betrayal paints my insides.

“Yeah...” I swallow the dry lump in my throat. “I know her.”

*Or at least, I thought I did.*

**twenty-five**

...

Work has abruptly changed. Now that Eli made junior partner, my workload seems to have tripled. No more slacking off and long lunch breaks. I actually have to *work*. I spent the entire day researching property law and state-specific mandates for granting joint custody. *Kill me yesterday...*

I'm trying to give Miles space so he can get ready for the studio. Therefore, after a grueling day it's just me, a glass of rosé, a steaming bubble bath, and my turquoise, vibrating, little silicon buddy.

The tub is nearly full when I hear an aggressive pounding at the door. It's faint at first and fades away. It's eight o'clock, and I'm sure some delivery guy is trying to drop off dinner at the wrong door. He'll get the hint when I don't answer. I dip my toe in the tub, testing the water. *Perfect. Scalding.*

*Pound, pound, pound!*

"Fuck!" I grumble, turning off the running water and yanking a towel from the rack to wrap around my naked body. I tuck in the edge of the towel ensuring it's secure and won't fall off when I use both of my middle fingers to give the asshole at the door a piece of my mind.

Ripping open the door, I growl, "What?" I immediately soften my tone when I realize it's Miles. "Oh, sorry. I didn't know you were coming over—"

I stop when I notice his red eyes and twitchy lips.

"I didn't know I was." His eyes are on the ground.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been driving around for a while...”

My stomach twists. It’s clear something is off, and I get the sneaking suspicion it has nothing to do with his meeting today. But I ask anyway... “Did the deal fall through?”

“The opposite,” he barely mutters. “It was a great offer. Law’s thrilled.”

Crossing my arms, I suddenly feel the urge to cover up. I’m normally one to get right to the point. I don’t like this foreign, cool demeanor he’s wearing. I want to ask him, *what the fuck is wrong with you?* But I’m nervous. Why do I feel like I’m in trouble?

“Do you want to come in?”

“I needed to look you in the eyes when I asked you a question...”

I narrow my eyes, unappreciative of his tone. “Then ask,” I snap.

“Are you cheating on Petey with me? Were you guys together when you slept with me?” He sucks in a deep breath and gives me an icy stare. I should clarify right now, but I’m kind of curious about how big of a ditch he’s willing to dig. You really get to know a man’s character when he’s angry and feels betrayed. *Okay, Miles—show your hand.* I brace myself for all the undeserved insults I’m sure he’s about to sling at me. He continues, “You told me not to break your trust. How could you break mine?”

“How did I break your trust?”

He shakes his head, and his eyes drop back to the floor. “I’m not doing this. I deserve better. And so does he. I came here to tell you I’m walking away, but you need to come clean. He’s obviously in love with you, and if you’re running around on him...that’s shitty, Reese. *Really shitty.*”

“It would be *shitty*, Miles. And I would come clean if I had anything to come clean about.” This time I don’t simply ask him to come in, I yank him through the door and slam it

behind us. I place my hands against the full curve of his biceps. He tries to step backward, out of my reach, but I step with him.

“Take a breath,” I tell him. I patiently wait until he meets my eyes. “I *know* this feeling. It’s physically painful when you find out you were lied to, manipulated, and there’s someone else in the picture. And I’m going to tell you what I wished I would’ve heard in that moment, okay?”

He nods as he sucks in his lips.

“I didn’t cheat on you. What’s more, I never would. Miles, I’m crazy about you. You make me happy. Why...*why* would I throw away happiness? We can talk about whatever happened to make you come up with this crazy ass assumption, but first I need you to decide right here and now if you trust me.” I squeeze his tense arms. “Nothing’s changed. From the day I met you, it’s been only you. So, all this tension you’re carrying...” I stroke up to his shoulders and give them a slight squeeze before I wrap my hands around his neck. “Let it go.” I’m relieved when he embraces me and I feel the warm pressure of his hands pressed firmly into the small of my back.

“I trust you,” he says.

“Good. *Relax.*”

He ducks his head and nestles his cheek into the crook of my neck. “Thank you.” His whisper cracks against my ear. “I’ve had the fucking worst day.”

“You should’ve called me, immediately.”

“This seemed like an in-person kind of conversation.”

“Then, let’s have it. Sit down.” I grab a glass from the cabinet and pour a drink for Miles. I seriously doubt he likes pink bubbly wine, but the man needs something to chill the fuck out at the moment. “Here, baby,” I say, handing him the glass. He relaxes onto the couch and I plop down next to him, draping my calves over his lap. “So, why do you think I’m a two-timing whore?”

“Wow.” He takes a sip of the wine, the color in his face returning. “I definitely did not call you that.”

“Miles, get to the point.”

“Guess who the mystery buyer is?”

*Of course.* I roll my eyes so hard that they may not descend from the back of my skull. “Wild guess—Petey?”

“Yes. I met him this afternoon, and I spent most of the meeting in awe that I got to have a conversation with my favorite rapper. Everything was going great until he told me he was trying to work with your dad again.”

“Why would you think that means I cheated on you?”

“He showed me that heart on the wall of the break room with the initials.” *Oh shit.* “He’s PM?”

“That was a long time ago...I was seventeen.”

“He said you were his girl.” He finishes off the glass of wine, dramatically tipping the bottom of the glass to the ceiling so he can guzzle down every last drop.

“You like rosé?”

“Not at all,” he grumbles.

I laugh. “Want another?”

“Not right now,” he says, placing his big palm just north of my knee.

“Miles, I have no idea why he said that. I *was* his girl back then, but I’m definitely not anymore. In fact, he’s engaged to someone else.”

Miles cocks his head and raises one eyebrow, nonverbally asking me how I know that.

“Petey came to see me at my apartment on Friday. He left his record label and he wants to work on another album with Dad. He gave me *those*”—I point over my shoulder at the clear vase that’s holding my purple tulips that are now in full bloom—“as an apology for being so careless with my heart and dragging me through hell for the last few years of our relationship. Hence the reason Petey and I are not together and never will be again. But he seems to be in a better place these days, and he says he’s trying to make amends. If you want the

truth, I feel like he wants peace with me just to get in good with my dad.”

“How long were you guys together?”

“That’s complicated,” I say, rubbing my fingers over the back of my hand. “You want the highlights or the whole story?”

“Reese, when it comes to you—I want everything.” I look at Miles and see a man worth being honest with. Inhaling a deep breath, I decide to spill all the secrets I’ve tried to hold so close to my heart.

“Hang tight.” Swinging my legs around, I pop off the couch and make my way to the top right of my media rack. I return to Miles, resuming my position, after handing him a plain CD case with *Depth* written in black sharpie on the front. “I co-wrote this. This is the only copy where you’ll hear me sing.”

“You co-wrote *Depth*?” Miles holds the CD in his palm, pretending to weigh it in the air like it’s heavy. “How come you’re not credited?”

“I never asked. I didn’t understand royalties and rights or getting points for producing an album. It wasn’t that complex when we didn’t expect anything to come of it. We wrote the album for the heart of it. When I first met Petey, his biggest goal was to just be brave enough to put his words out into the world. Believe it or not, he’s really sensitive.” I watch Miles’s stoic expression as he hangs on my every word. “Petey’s mom disappeared on him when he was a teenager. He bounced around from friend’s couch to friend’s couch until he turned eighteen, but he didn’t have money for college. Flipping burgers didn’t make enough for him to get an apartment and afford to live. He was so hurt and lost.”

“That’s awful,” Miles says, shaking his head.

“It’s a big difference from having a mom so kind and caring that she wants her family to eat organic and learned to make kombucha for you guys.”

Miles's stony expression softens. "My mom would love you."

"Are you going to let me meet her?"

"Whenever you want."

My cheeks flood with warmth like sunshine's kissing my cheek. "The minute this album is done. When I meet her, I want to be able to say I'm your girlfriend."

He squeezes my ankle. "You got it. So, explain this album to me." He twists the CD in the air.

"My Dad discovered Petey at this open mic night. He was there as a busboy, but I think he signed up to read a little poetry. I guess Dad must've been intrigued or something, or maybe it was pity, but he just took him in like a homeless puppy. I think at the time Petey was still sleeping on random couches and even the shelter some nights. So, my dad offered him the guest room and taught him everything he knew about the craft of hip-hop."

"You guys were shacked up?"

"Oh, no, no. My mom was wildly controlling at the time. Dad used to drink a lot, and party a lot. All he cared about was the studio, so she did her best to keep him at arm's length... from both of us. But of course, Petey and I eventually ran into each other. We were just friends at first. But then we started working on *Depth*. The first few songs he wrote weren't bad. They were just angry, cocky, and all kinds of bitter. It was shallow."

"Really? *Depth*? Because I know that album inside and out, and I'd hardly call it shallow."

"Well, that's because you never heard the first version. I told Petey those songs weren't *him*. I told him it was okay to be angry at his mom, that it was okay to be tired and frustrated that life dealt him a shit hand. I told him being sensitive and vulnerable is how you connect with people and instead of trying to be the tough guy, he should show his true colors. All that emotion he bottled up inside...that's what he should rap about. That's what people want to hear. But he needed a little



guidance and encouragement, so..." I nod at the CD in Miles's hand. "This is the very first copy of *Depth* ever. Just the raw files, it's not mastered. It's a reminder to myself that I was part of this. Every time Petey would get lost on a line, I'd help him fill it in. When he couldn't figure out if he liked a melody, I'd sing it to him. I poured my soul into that album, and I'm really proud of it."

"You kept this as a souvenir?" Miles raises one brow and I know what he's asking.

"As a souvenir from the most passion-driven time of my life. It's when I knew I wanted to produce music. I wanted to be part of the creation of sounds and lyrics that move people. I wanted to make music that helps people *feel*. Working on *Depth* was the most fulfilling time of my life, but when Petey and I broke up, I lost that part of me. I spiraled..."

"He hurt you?"

"Have you ever been really in love before? Like, in love to the point where when you're apart you don't know how to breathe?"

Miles is quiet for a moment. "I don't...I don't think so. Nothing that intense."

"Petey was my first everything. First time I fell in love. I lost my virginity to him. I moved across the country and pretty much gave my mom the bird for him. I planned my whole life around being Petey's girl. And for the first few years, we were like Bonnie and Clyde. Yin and Yang. We seemed so good together, but when he started getting a little traction with his music, he just...changed. I was home a lot, alone. He'd tour and leave me behind, insisting I needed to focus on school. I made excuses for him for a while, but eventually, he suggested we take a break. I was so angry, I moved home.

"I left thinking he'd wise up and come back for me. I left him to show him what he was missing, but he saw it as an opportunity. We were on and off for years after that. He'd declare his love for me in the morning, then break up with me by that evening and go fuck around with every woman who batted an eyelash at him. It was always technicalities. He

didn't *technically* cheat—the text message said we were broken up. He didn't *technically* lie, he really *was* at his friend's place for the first part of the night. He didn't *technically* owe me any explanations—I wasn't his wife."

"*Jesus,*" Miles says with a huff. "Mind games. I just lost a little respect for him."

"See? That's why I hate telling this story. In the end, Petey was an awful boyfriend. But that doesn't mean he's not an amazing musician. A literary genius. A good friend. We're just not good together. I finally see that, and I'm done being angry about it. I don't want to go back to that empty place anymore." Rolling my head, I try to release the pressure that's building in my neck. It's funny how a heavy conversation can physically *feel* heavy.

"How did you guys leave it?"

"I barreled through endless hookups after I cut Petey out of my life, trying to make him a distant memory. But when I cut Petey out, I cut a piece of myself out too. That passion-driven, creative part of me went dormant."

Miles blinks at me then squirms a bit in his seat. "Endless?"

"Sorry, deal with it. You knew you weren't dating a virgin."

He looks embarrassed. "I didn't say anything—"

"Your expression did." I point to his forehead with a teasing smirk.

"I don't like the idea of you with anyone but me. Is that possessive?"

"Yes. But I kind of like it. It feels nice to be wanted and claimed." Leaning forward, I tap the tip of his nose. "But you can't claim my past."

"I'm here now," he murmurs, running his hand up and down my shin.

"True, but you took your sweet time coming into the picture." I pair my cheeky smile with a wink. "But that's the

reason. I don't know how to explain it, but I met you and I felt a little like my real self again—the me I thought I lost. I laugh at the little jokes. I smile even when you're not around. You make me think that happiness is easy, and I shouldn't settle for anything less. Suddenly, I want to pursue what matters, instead of settling for what makes sense. For the first time in a really long time, when it comes to falling in love, I feel like the rewards outweigh the risks. You give me hope.”

I'm having trouble reading his expression. His hazy green eyes are locked on mine, but he's looking right past me. It's as though he's seeing me in a new way. I should be more careful with my words. Just because I'm ready to fall in love again... doesn't mean Miles is. And my baggage is a little intimidating, I'll admit.

Miles finally breaks the silence. “You need to know two things, Reese.” He places the CD on my coffee table. “What?”

“Petey said he bought The Garage to gift to you.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, he said it meant everything to you, and it was some grand gesture.” Miles's brows are furrowed in anguish. The corners of his eyes are cinched, defensively.

“I don't know anything about it. Maybe it's just another misunderstanding...or another apology. But either way, he didn't offer, I didn't accept, and I won't if you don't want me to.” But I have to breathe through the flutters in my chest because The Garage—*as my own?* Only in the depths of my heart and mind will I admit that it's a literal dream come true.

“I'm not giving you ultimatums. I want you to be happy. But make no mistake, he wants you back.”

“He's engaged, Miles. He doesn't want me ba—”

“Reese.” Miles's hand creeps past my knee, his eyes tiptoeing up my leg where the slit in the towel is exposing my thigh. “You won't believe how a man will lie, steal, and cheat for love. *He wants you back.*”

“I don't—”

“The second thing you need to know is *I don't care* that he wants you back.” Miles tugs at the top of the towel, unwrapping me carefully like I'm a treasure. He licks his lips as his eyes burn over my bare breasts. “He sure as hell can't have you.”

---

## miles

I toss Reese onto her bed and tell her to wait for me. I need to relieve the tank first. It's after I've flushed, washed my hands, and am gargling a little mouthwash that I notice her tub is full. Sitting on the ledge of her garden-style tub is a glass of rosé, her phone and headphones, and her turquoise vibrator.

I spit the mouthwash in the sink and rinse down the blue liquid. "I didn't realize I was interrupting your bath," I call through the door.

"It's fine," she calls back, "I'm glad we—*oh shit.*"

And with that, I know she remembers what she left out... and what I found.

With the most wicked, playful smile on my face, I emerge from the bathroom holding her toy, clicking the power button on and off to test the vibration against my palm. "When did you charge this?"

Her cheeks fill with color, and I chuckle at her obvious embarrassment. "I don't know," she mutters, crossing her legs and covering as much of her full tits as she can with her forearm.

"Oh, hey now, I thought you said you weren't ashamed by this. Remember the first time you mentioned this was in your shower?"

She glowers at me. "Yeah, but that's when I wasn't caught red-handed. And that was also when you were a random guy I was going to sleep with and probably never see again. Now you're my...you know—*person.*"

"Your *person*?" I chuckle at her again. "Well, your *person* happens to think this is incredibly sexy." Sitting on the bed next to her feet, I trill my fingers against the side of her calf, feeling her baby smooth skin. "If you needed your fix, you could've called me."

“You’ve been working a lot.” Her smile returns, and the red color in her cheeks dissipates to pink. Now she just looks eager. “I didn’t want to be needy.”

Grabbing her ankle, I extend her bent leg and trail kisses up her shin, past her knee, to her mid-thigh... “I would drop anything and everything to meet you.” *Kiss*. “Whenever.” *Kiss*. “Wherever.” *Kiss*. “All you have to do is call.”

Her smile is wicked. “You sure? I have a pretty healthy libido. Keeping me entertained will be quite the commitment,” she says.

I turn on the vibrator and push her knees apart. “I suppose there’s help when I need it.”

She opens her mouth but instead of a sassy, flirty remark, all she can do is groan in pleasure as I push her vibrator firmly against her clit, making her writhe and thrash in place. Gripping the sheet beneath her, she braces. She blinks slowly like opening her eyelids takes inhuman strength. I love the heavy, pleasure-filled look in her eyes. I love feeling how hot she is against my palm. I *love* when it’s like this—slow and adventurous like there’s nothing else in the world we need to be doing than be here, with each other.

I wait until her hips bridge, just an inch.

“Oh fuck, I’m close,” she groans. And with that, I pull the vibrator away, click the power button and toss it over my shoulder. “*What the hell?*” There’s an angry fire in her eyes and I stare right into them, embracing the heat.

Biting on my lower lip I take a moment to enjoy her nakedness. Her spread legs, swollen bud glistening with her arousal, the way her rosy nipples are so hard they look painful. “That orgasm’s mine, baby. I’m not sharing it with your toy.” I rip off my shirt and climb out of my pants and briefs with my eyes still deadlocked on her. She stares right back, and neither of us looks away. Not when I trail my fingers across her wet slit, not when I sink my thickest finger into her crease, and definitely not when she reaches between us to wrap my hard cock in a death grip.

“Sit up,” she says as she throws her pillows over my head and onto the ground, clearing a space for me to lean against her headboard. Straddling my lap, she presses into me, stomach against stomach, her tits smashed against my chest. “Hold me tight,” she says into my ear then slides right over my erection.

“Goddamn, you’re wet.” I try to control my breathing and keep my eyes on hers. Ducking her chin, she sucks and nips at my neck as she starts to grind against me. I buck my hips as best I can in this position and she flinches. “Hurts?”

“No, just...tender. I’m not used to a guy being able to hit that spot.”

I buck my hips again, *hard* and she cries out as her teeth sink into my shoulder. “*Fuck, Miles,*” she wails. I don’t stop. A carnal drive takes over. There’s something I desperately need to prove.

“No one is ever going to hit it like I do, baby,” I grumble in her ear. “That’s *my* spot.” Her eyes must be watering because I feel a hot tear drop down my back.

Grabbing her fleshy ass, I lay her backward into the soft comforter. Our bodies are glued, and I stay nestled in her sopping heat. I hover over her and plant kisses all over her beautiful doll face. I return the favor of sucking on her neck and feel her goosebumps rise against my tongue. “You like this?”

“So much,” she says, her voice cracking.

With her thighs pinned under mine, I make sure she can’t move. I’m not going to touch that spot again until she’s begging me. And I’m in no rush...

I suckle on her nipples, one at a time until they’re glistening with my saliva. Then I watch her shudder and wiggle when I blow on them. They were hard before, now they’re diamonds.

“Fuck me,” she demands, trying to thrust her hips to catch a little friction.

“Tell me something first.”

“You’re a real piece of work.” She bites her bottom lip and glares at me. “You enjoy torturing me like this. What do you want?”

“Is this enough?” I watch her eyes dart between mine. Teasingly, I push into her, half an inch deeper. Her pussy clenches around me as she groans. I stop before I get carried away.

“What?” she whines. “What’s enough?”

“This. Am I enough? Could you fuck me like this forever?”

Her lips relax and she wraps her hand around my neck, guiding me to her lips. Her kiss is hungry, rugged, and telling. “You’re too much, Miles. So overwhelming in fact, I’m going to have to be careful not to lose myself in you.” She presses her palms against my chest and I relax against the warmth of her embrace. “I know what you’re asking...I know what’s going through your head. And you don’t need to worry. You *fuck* me right, *and* you treat me right. *There’s no comparison.*”

“Good girl,” I coo. “Those are the magic words. Tell me how you like it.”

“Hard.”

She screams when I pummel into her with no mercy. Holding her ankles together, I throw them over my left shoulder so her thighs are out of my way. I need to get deeper. I need to touch that spot—that tender spot. I want to wreck her in the best way, then put her back together. She can be Bonnie, but there’s a new Clyde.

She doesn’t need to tell me when she’s coming. I can feel it. Every inch of her body is trembling—from her drenched pussy to her full pink bottom lip, her orgasm is uncontrollable. So much in fact, she drags me over the edge with her. I ride the waves of her orgasm until my release explodes. I don’t bother pulling out, we fuck until I spill every last drop inside of her. She never protests when I finish like this. Maybe we’re both trying to prove something.

This is lust *and* it’s trust.



When we're completely spent, I slump to the left and pull her tightly against my side. She giggles as I nuzzle against her wild curly mane and intertwine my legs with hers. We wrap ourselves up in a human pretzel. I'm overheating, but it's fine. I'd happily endure these flames and burn to death if need be. This girl is the last thing I want to see before I leave this earth.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Reese mumbles as she plants sweet kisses against my pec.

"What?"

"As much as I love your dick, *this* is my favorite part."

I kiss the top of her head. "Cuddling?"

"The fact that you're still here." She nestles deeper into me. "And you're in no hurry to leave."

I can't hold her any tighter, but I try anyway. The woman I met was a fucking red-hot pistol. Smart, sassy, sweet, and sexy as fuck. She could have any man she wants and should tolerate no shit from anyone. Yet, she's still surprised every time I'm decent to her. I can't help but hate Petey for it. At the same time, I'm grateful for him. Had he not shit the bed so hard maybe she wouldn't notice all the little ways I show her how much she means to me. Every call. Every text. Every time I tell the truth that she's the only woman on my mind.

What Petey broke, I'm happy to fix.

"Where would I go, baby? I'm right where I want to be."

**twenty-six**

...

After nearly losing my shit in downtown Denver traffic hour, I finally arrive at Westlake Suites. Flying through the lobby and straight to the elevators, I press P for the penthouse. I hold my breath as I pound on the penthouse door aggressively, with the heel of my palm. *Predictable*. I knew exactly where Petey was staying without having to ask. He's a creature of habit—same hotel, same lies, same bullshit. *So fucking predictable*.

Petey opens the door with a surprised look on his face. I don't blame him. I was knocking like I was the SWAT team. I glance over his shoulder and see his main living room is empty. *Okay, that's actually surprising*. Petey usually doesn't travel anywhere without a circle of protection around his body...and his ego.

"Reese? It's nice to see you."

I point right between his eyes. "No. It's not *nice* to see me. What the *fuck* are you playing at?"

"What?"

"You're telling people I'm *your girl*? You bought The Garage *for me*? Tell me honestly...are you even engaged or were you just trying to hurt me? And what's more—*what for*? Haven't you done enough damage? Haven't you taken enough from me?"

If his eyes get any wider, they are going to pop right out of his head. He's wearing the look of a criminal who is surprised he got caught. "I can explain..."

I take a moment to eye him up and down. He's in a black sweat suit—matching hoodie and sweatpants, and his normally richly tan skin looks a little pale. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” He takes a giant step backward as he coughs into his fist. “Just a little cold. I'd invite you in, but I don't want to get you sick.”

“Where are your people?”

“What people?”

“Your manager, agent, entourage...”

“I haven't had a dedicated manager since Parker died. My agent was with Elite Records, but I'm done there now. D was here, but she had to head back to the East Coast. I'm not her only client.”

“What about your friends?”

“If you can call them that”—he coughs again—“they're back in Atlanta enjoying the good life.” He rolls his eyes. “Off my dime.”

I feel bad for him. My friends are so close, we get sick together. Not even the flu could scatter us. The last time I was sick, even germophobic Mani, dressed in basically a hazmat suit, came to check on me and drop me off my favorite soup. She sat on the opposite side of the couch as we watched the entire trilogy of *Pitch Perfect*. She flinched every time I sneezed, but point being—she was there for me.

If I had any control over my instincts, I'd walk away. The smart thing to do is tell this reckless, conniving man he deserves to drown in a bucket of putrid green snot, but the problem is I'm seeing ghosts. It's not Petey Pete the Sneak, the cocky-ass hip-hop superstar, in front of me at the moment. He looks a whole lot like the Petey I used to know. Kind eyes, soft spoken, down on his luck...the man that needed me.

“What's your temperature?”

He shrugs. “Hot?” He sneezes into the crook of his elbow and then immediately grabs his temples like he's trying to hold in the pressure. His eyes clamp shut in anguish. I wish I could

say he was putting on a show, but he genuinely looks miserable.

I let out a dramatic huff of annoyance as I cross the threshold and close the door with my foot. “Peter Mills, a grown-ass man worth millions, and still doesn’t know how to take care of himself,” I mutter as I head to the fancy kitchenette. Actually, who are we kidding—it’s the penthouse at Westlake. This supposed mini kitchen is twice the size of my own. I fill a sleek blue tea kettle with water and pop it on the stove.

I feel Petey’s eyes on me. He lets out a long low whistle. “She called me Peter, folks,” he mumbles to himself. “You know I’m in trouble now.”

---

**Me:** I’m at Petey’s. He’s pretty sick.

**Addie:** This is the part of the movie where Leatherface is about to emerge from the shadows.

**Mani:** Huh?

**Noa:** As in she should run for her life.

**Addie:** Thank you, Nono. At least one of you gets me.

**Noa:** Got you, Addie \*blow kiss emoji\*.

**Quinn:** I’m coming to get you, smack some sense into you, then we’ll go for ice cream after.

**Noa:** You’re going to be such a good mom.

**Quinn:** \*horrified expression emoji\* Not in this life.

**Addie:** You may want to talk to your hubby. I’m pretty sure Cody wants a whole litter.

**Mani:** GUYS! Can we focus? Reese is in the lair. Dracula’s sucking her blood as we speak.

**Addie:** I’m sure he’s trying to suck something. Probably not her blood...

**Reese:** Hey! \*clap emoji\* \*clap emoji\* \*clap emoji\* It's innocent. But it doesn't look good. I've been here for hours. The problem is I can't leave. His temperature spiked to 103.

**Quinn:** Drop him off at the ER.

**Noa:** Don't even stop. Just slow the car...roll him out.

**Addie:** Slap a sticky note on his back that says: contagious cheating bastard.

**Reese:** Are you guys done? Mani?

**Mani:** Hold please...still thinking...what rhymes with good for nothing man whore?

**Reese:** Can you all be helpful now? Do I call Miles and tell him where I am?

**Quinn:** And make him worry for nothing? No.

**Addie:** If it's innocent—tell him. Yes.

**Mani:** HELL NO.

**Noa:** You may have good intentions. Petey probably does not. Call Miles and tell him to come rescue you.

**Reese:** Hung jury? That's how we're going to leave this?

**Addie:** You're the tiebreaker, Pieces.

*Fuck.*

I toss my phone on the living room coffee table and head to Petey's bedroom. He's buried under the covers except for one foot that's peeking out. Petey has oddly beautiful feet. I never thought I'd say that about a man, but it's undeniable. If I hadn't spent every waking minute with him during our younger years, I would've been absolutely positive that he got regular pedicures.

"Petey," I whisper as I approach one side of the California King. "It's eight o'clock. I think I need to head out."

"Okay," he croaks. "Thanks for coming by." It's remarkable how fast his symptoms have progressed. At five-thirty he was able to walk to the door. By eight o'clock he's sweaty and near delirious.

“I’ll get you another cool rag before I go, but you need to take another dose of the fever reducer in two hours.”

“Yeah,” he whispers. “Got it. The blue stuff, right?”

“It’s red, Petey.”

“Yeah, yeah—I got it...the blue stuff...”

*Oh geez.* He’s so tired, he’s not even able to process what I’m saying.

“Do you want to eat? You should put something in your stomach because the medicine can be tough on your system.”

“Not hungry.” His voice strains and he frees his hand from underneath the comforter to press against his throat.

“Hurts?” I ask, fighting the urge to stroke the top of his cornrows to comfort him. Ex-boyfriend or not, it’s not fun seeing anyone like this—weak and in agony. He nods as he taps against his windpipe, aka his money maker. If Petey was on tour, this would be a DEFCON five emergency. No one makes money off him if he can’t perform.

“I’ll be okay,” Petey whispers. “Text me tomorrow and we can talk, okay? I’ll explain everything.” His heavy lids fall shut. I almost forgot what I barged over here for. When I saw how sick Petey was, I decided my verbal assault could wait... as could his explanation.

“Petey, will you text me if it gets hard to breathe? There’s a nasty respiratory thing still going around.” As long as I’ve known him, Petey’s been susceptible to illnesses like this. The rest of us would get through with a day or two of coughs and sniffles, but when Petey goes down—he goes down hard. During one emergency trip to the hospital, he had to be put on a respirator for two days.

“Reese,” he mumbles sleepily, “the blue stuff, I got it. I’ll be okay. You can go.”

*Shit.* “I’m going to order you some soup,” I grumble under my breath, but I doubt he hears me. I resign to my fate tonight. Hung jury—and I’m the tiebreaker. And I’m going to choose to be a gracious person. I send a quick text message to Eli,

letting him know I won't be at work tomorrow. I need to make sure I don't get sick before spreading this at the office, and at any rate, I have a feeling I'm going to be exhausted after playing nurse all night.

After Eli's understanding return message, I make the call that I've been dreading.

"Hey, baby." Miles sounds cheery as usual.

"Hey."

"What's wrong? Oh, are you with your dad?" He clears his throat.

My chuckle falls short. "No." *Please, please, please just be cool.* "I need a pass."

"What?"

"I need you to be a trusting, cool as fuck secret boyfriend who knows I would never do anything to betray you, and that the minute this album is done I'll be screaming from the top of every high rise in this city that I'm your girlfriend."

"Okay..." He lets out a deep breath and is silent for a brief moment. "All right, I'm ready. Lay it on me. What do I need to be cool about?"

"I'm at Petey's hotel."

"Fuck," he gripes. "I had a feeling..."

"Obviously, nothing happened."

"Baby, I'm not your keeper. You said you were going to clear things up with Petey. I understand. I don't love the idea of you being there at night, but I meant it when I said I trust you."

"Thank you." I sigh in relief, and I wish the conversation could end here. "But you're really not going to like this next part."

"*Fuck,*" he mumbles again.

"Am I testing your patience?"

"A little..."



“I have to stay tonight. He’s *so* sick, and he’s a total masochist when it comes to this stuff. I’d feel really bad leaving him, but I don’t want you to think it’s just about Petey. I wouldn’t leave a homeless person on the street in this condition.”

He lets out an audible growl of frustration. “Is this your thing? Playing Florence Nightingale to every wounded man, down on his luck?”

I smile into the phone. “If I remember correctly, that ended up working out in your favor.”

“True.” His laugh is breathy and soft.

“I just want to make sure he takes his next dose of fever reducers and eats something.”

“Eat what?”

I purse my lips at his response. This better not be an eating pussy joke.

“*Soup*, Miles.”

“Obviously, Reese,” he says, his sass surprising me. “What *kind* of soup?”

“I think he likes chicken noodle, or chicken and rice. Why?”

“Where are you guys?”

“Westlake in LoDo. The penthouse.”

“*Of course the penthouse*,” he mutters bitterly. “All right, give me an hour. I’ll swing by the grocery store and drop off some soup.”

I wanted Miles to be understanding...this is a leap *past* understanding. It’s supportive. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Is this because you’re worried and want to mark your territory?”

He snorts. “You think I’d fight a sick man?”

“Is that so crazy? You’re not at all intimidated by the fact that he’s *Petey*?”

My FaceTime ring sounds and I immediately answer his video call. Miles’s handsome face and warm smile fill my screen. He’s behind the bar at The Garage. Full bottles of liquor surround him. “Hey, you.” I swoon into the phone. “You shaved.” His lack of beard exposes his sweet youthful face. I think Miles uses his beard to play dress up—a man twice his age.

“Hey you, back. And yeah, I forgot.” He touches his smooth cheek. “What do you think?”

“You’re sexy with *and* sexy without.”

Miles stares into my eyes for a bit, just watching me blink. For a moment I think our connection is frozen, but then he speaks. “You want the truth on whether I’m intimidated by *Petey*?” he asks.

I look over my shoulder to make sure the coast is clear. “Yeah.”

“Of course, I’m intimidated, but acting insecure and jealous is only going to drive you away, right?”

*Maybe...depends.* I raise my shoulders and drop them, unable to come up with a better response.

“Then my strategy is to treat you so damn well that you’ll never think about another man again. *Petey* has your past, but I’m your future, Reese. And I’m trusting that you’re an eyes-forward kind of girl.”

I wonder if he can hear my heart pounding through the phone. Maybe he can see the warmth fill my cheeks. I wonder if he knows how well his words wrap around me and hold me tight, making me feel so damn secure. A far cry from my past relationship.

“I think I lo—*really* like you, Miles.” My cheeks go from warm to burning with embarrassment.

He bursts out laughing. “Whoops,” he says, pointing at me with a glib smile. “Careful there. Almost slipped, sweetheart.”

Miles winks. Slip or not, it's pretty obvious how I feel. I'm not ashamed of it, just a little scared. Falling in love feels so good. The aftermath, however...I've only known one version. "I'll see you soon."

The minute our connection ends, the door to the master bedroom creaks open. Petey, moving like molasses, makes his way through the door. His brows lift when he sees me. He's clearly surprised I'm still here. "Thought you were heading out?"

"Thought I told you to stay in bed and rest."

Clearing his throat, he grimaces. "I ran out of water." He rubs the back of his neck. "And I've been lying down for too long."

I pat the couch cushion next to me but hop up immediately. "Sit down, I'll get it for you." Rummaging through his junk-filled fridge, I find a cold bottle of water and return to Petey.

"Thanks." He takes a sip and sighs like he's relieved. "Who was that?" he asks, nodding at my phone.

"Miles."

"The Garage manager?"

"Mhmm. He's going to swing by and drop you off some soup. Is that okay?"

Petey narrows his eyes. "That's nice," he mumbles. "Why?"

I should tell him. Right here and now—clear the air. Miles is with me and I'm with him. But at the moment, I have a lot of unanswered questions about what Petey wants...what he's doing here...what's going to happen with my dad... And I don't feel like now is the time to be vulnerable with him.

"He's meeting Dad in the studio, tomorrow. I was telling him what time to come by. I told him you were sick, and he was concerned."

Petey nods as he sets the water bottle down on the coffee table and reaches behind him to pull a throw blanket over his torso. "He's a nice guy. I met him yesterday."

*I know.* “Yeah, when you told him you bought The Garage for your girl. Miles and I are friends Petey, *we talk.*”

“Shit.” The fabric of the couch cinches beneath him as Petey sinks lower into his seat. He covers his eyes with one hand. “That was...I just...” Dropping his hand, he looks me dead in the eyes with a sleepy, pathetic look. “Lied. I’m sorry. It was wishful thinking, like if I said it, it’d make it more true. I didn’t think it meant anything to anyone—I didn’t even know you knew him when I said it.”

His throaty cough comes through as a loud bellow. He covers what he can with his elbow and the blanket, but it’s too late. I’m sure this virus has already snuck its way into my system one way or the other. “Petey, that sounds awful. Let’s just talk another time.”

“No, I want to explain. Now.”

Leaning back into the armrest on the opposite side of the couch, I give him my most unimpressed look. “Go ahead.” *Explain this one away...*

“My mom reached out about eight months ago...”

My upper-hand, make-him-grovel demeanor instantly dissipates. “Oh my God...*what?* What the hell could she have to say?” I’m so loud that my voice echoes off the walls of the spacious, open-concept main room. This really isn’t a penthouse...it’s a freaking estate.

“Just bullshit,” Petey says, his eyes dropping low as the corners of his lips turn down. “She got through to me on social media of all things. At first, I thought it was a hoax, but it was her all right.”

“What did she want?”

“What do you think? Money. It’s *always* about money when it comes to me. The funny thing is, she didn’t even apologize for abandoning a sixteen-year-old kid. She started spouting some shit about how she was in a bad place and knew I’d do better on my own, and *look at you now, Peter*”—his tone grows mocking—“*I just needed to give you space and look what you made of yourself. I’m so proud of you.*”

“Shut the fuck up. She did not say that.” My blood boils. It’s not my battle to fight, but I hate that woman with my whole heart. How many nights did I comfort her son because she threw him away like he meant nothing?

“Yeah, and when that shit didn’t work on me, she started spewing out how I owe her, and she got me to sixteen, and it was time for me to pay her back.”

I bury my face in my hands. “Unbelievable. Did you block her?”

“Nah,” Petey scoffs. “I just left her stuff on read and watched her spiral. You should’ve seen the nasty, hateful shit she sent.”

“Sounds like she’s on—”

“Drugs. Yeah...” He covers his mouth as he coughs again. “That’s what I was thinking too.”

“Petey...I...” I watch the wall over his shoulder, unwilling to look him in the eyes and have this statement mean more than it should. “From the bottom of my heart, I’m sorry. She should’ve done better. She doesn’t deserve you. And you don’t owe her anything.”

“I know,” he mutters. “But it got me thinking about my real family.” He sucks in his lips and holds his forehead against his fist, either in pain from his flu-like symptoms or his aching heart—I’m not sure. “If Parker were alive, he would’ve snatched up my phone and tossed it out the window before he let me hear anything Mom had to say. But he died, and none of my homeboys understood how that woman could rattle me. I’d already been getting the side eye because I had nothing in the studio. Everything was just...” He trails off and reaches for his water.

After guzzling down half the bottle, he speaks a little more clearly. “I started forgetting why I did all this in the first place. I have all this money, but I have a whole team who tells me how I should be spending it. I have to pump out songs on a schedule and there’s no heart to it anymore. I don’t feel inspired. I don’t feel like what I’m saying matters. Nothing is

for real. Nothing is honest. I am starting to hate what my life has become.”

“You bought The Garage as an act of rebellion? Just to spend your money how you want?”

“Sort of,” he says with a chuckle. “D thinks it’s the stupidest thing to invest in, but I put my foot down. I’ve been thinking about a time when I felt good about my life, about myself. It was when I was living with Mac and performing at The Garage, and...” He licks his chapped lips. “The last time I can remember that you loved me.”

I tuck my knees into my chest, wishing there was another blanket I could use. A chill washes over me. I pictured this conversation so many times—never once did I imagine it being this tame. I pictured screaming and hurtling glass items at his head. “I loved you for a long time after we left Denver, Petey. I loved you for a long time after I left Atlanta too.”

“You left me when it got hard.”

I feel my anger rise. “I left when you started disrespecting me. Then, I came home, and *I* started disrespecting myself when I let you drag me through the mud. You’d give me hope, then snuff it out. You changed. You became this shallow, sniveling, money-hungry, fame-thirsty excuse of a human being. I didn’t leave you, Petey. The man I loved, disappeared.”

My fists are balled up at my sides like I’m ready for battle. I don’t care how sick he is, I will not take the blame for the wreckage of our relationship. I see right through the gaslighting. No matter what lame excuses come out of his mouth—

“You’re right.”

*What?* I swallow the words I have prepared to put him right in his place.

“You’re right. I lost myself. You guys were my family. I traded you and my soul for something that ended up meaning nothing. I’m alone, and I did that. I broke us. It was my fault and I have no excuses.”

*Well, shit.* He took the words right out of my mouth.

“Why did you lie to me about being engaged?”

“Because I’m an idiot—”

“No arguments here.”

He flattens his expression. “I told myself if I wanted forgiveness, I had to rebuild the foundation of what I broke. I figured if I approached you as just a friend, we could work on building trust and I could show you I’ve changed...or changed back. I didn’t want to even talk to Mac until I made things right with you first.”

I take a deep breath in and realize how sick I am of this conversation. “Peter,” I say softly.

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have to beg for my forgiveness. I’m done punishing you. I’m sorry we didn’t work out. We were so young and I’d rather just remember the good. There was a lot of bad but there was *a lot* of good too. To be honest, even now, I’m hurt seeing you hurt. I guess that means I will *always* care about you.”

He sighs in relief. “You’re such a good woman, Reese. You’re too good to me—”

I hold up my hand to stop him from falling down the wrong rabbit hole. “But as a friend. My heart isn’t available in any other way.”

I shift my eyes from the wounded expression on his face. “Okay,” he says like he understands, but the fact that he looks like he’s about to cry tells a different story. “I get it. I know it’ll take you time—”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m able to forgive you, Petey, because I’m in a good place. I’m not going back to *us*. I can’t be anything other than your friend...*ever*. So, you may want to rethink what you’re doing with The Garage, because if this is some grand romantic gesture...it’s lost on me. Okay?”

“Okay,” he says again, refusing to look at me now. We both stare over, around, and through each other, in silence,

trying to pretend like this conversation isn't killing us both. I thought rejecting Petey would feel good after all the anger and bitterness I've carried around for years. But what kind of awful person can smile at someone getting their heart broken?

"Also, I talked to my dad this past Sunday. I told him you were back in town."

"Yeah?" His eyes flitter with hope. "He's willing to talk to me?"

"Petey, he's willing to *work* with you. He loves you like his own, it's just"—I shrug my shoulders—"his loyalty is to me."

"As it should be."

"I told him that you were back in town and swung by to apologize. I told him we cleared the air. Obviously, this was before I found out you were going around spreading rumors that we're together—"

"I wasn't spreading rumors—" Petey grumbles.

"But the point is, it's water under the bridge. We're okay."

Petey licks his chapped lips again. They look red, swollen, and angry. "Are we?"

"What?"

"Are we okay? Or are we *okay*? Can I...talk to you now and then...if I need a friend?"

I glance at his pitiful puppy dog stare. "Yeah Petey, you can talk to me." I smile as I pull out my phone.

"Who are you calling?"

I wave my phone at him. "A text. I'm asking Miles to pick you up some Chapstick at the store." I point at his mouth. "Your lip licking always has, and always will, drive me fucking insane. I can't watch you destroy your lips like this while you're sick."

He lets out a raspy chuckle. "Same ol' Reese."



**twenty-seven**

...

“Thanks for coming with me, man.” Taking in a deep breath, I push the circular doorbell at Mac’s house. A long-winded chime follows.

“Where’s Reese?” Sedi asks. “I thought she was doing this with you.”

“She said her throat was feeling a little sore. She’s worried she caught something from Petey and doesn’t want to spread it. I said we could reschedule, but she told me to meet Mac solo today. It’s not like we’re recording anything, he just wants to talk and hear my ideas.”

“You sick too?” Sedi squints one eye, leans away, and makes a cross with his fingers. “I thought you went over there last night.”

“Barely. I dropped off some food and supplies, then Reese insisted I leave. She didn’t want to risk my singing voice.”

Sedi snorts. “So, you basically funded their date?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I grumble in annoyance as I push the doorbell again. *Shit, is that rude?* I don’t hear anyone in the house, maybe Mac doesn’t hear us.

“Reese was taking care of him. You found out and instead of telling that fucker to mind his place, you dropped him off food. Then Reese told you to leave? *Jesus*. What’s wrong with you, man?”

“I’m being the good guy. Reese doesn’t need a babysitter. I trust her.”

“Ookay, well, I hope you dropped them off some rubbers too, *Good Guy*.”

“Sedi!”

“*What?*”

“Don’t be a dick. Reese and I are solid. Speaking of which, keep your trap shut. Like I told you, Mac can’t know we’re—”

The door opens and Mac Reyes, with dripping wet hair and a towel wrapped around his waist, stands before us. *Hot damn, that’s a lot of chest hair.*

“Goddamn,” he says through a laugh. “I am *not* used to musicians being on time. I like you already.” His chuckle turns into a throaty roar. “You guys go get comfortable in the basement, let me throw on some clothes.” He points through the living room to a door with what looks like a neon sign above the frame. It reads, *Recording* and is currently unlit.

Sedi takes a step through the door and slides an inch forward before catching himself on Mac’s bare shoulder.

“Shit, sorry. Mind my wet footprints,” he says, trying to wipe his water trail with his foot. “There are drinks in the fridge by the way, but nothing alcoholic.”

“Thanks, Mac,” I say, shaking his hand firmly. “And no worries, we’re here to work.”

“Lesson number one in my studio, Miles”—Mac holds up one finger—“if you’re not having fun, it probably ain’t working.” With a quick wink, he ascends back up the stairs humming the whole way.

---

After about two hours of me playing one-handed melodies on Mac’s Casio, singing my lyrics a Capella, and performing a few covers in the studio so he can test my range, he seems sated. And by sated, I don’t mean satiated. I mean the pinched look on his face makes me think he’s heard enough. I jiggle

my knee nervously on his couch and he swivels around in his rolling chair, clearly lost in his thoughts.

Sedi knocks his leg against mine as a clear warning to calm the fuck down. But I can't help it...right now, Mac's word is everything to me.

"Is he sensitive?" Mac asks Sedi right in front of me.

"Eh, he's not a crier, but I've known him to mope."

I glare at my best friend as Mac chuckles. He and Sedi have formed a quick mentor-mentee relationship. Sedi eagerly agreed to be a second pair of hands on the DAW whenever Mac needs it.

"You can give it to me straight," I say to Mac, twisting the bill of my hat around so he can see my eyes.

"You sure? I've been told I'm too forward and direct."

*Yeah, I'm familiar. Like father, like daughter.*

"I'm sure."

Mac clicks his jaw and folds his hands together. "Let me ask you an honest question, and I want you to take a minute before you respond. Cool?"

"Yeah. Okay..."

"Do you want to be a singer or a singer-songwriter?"

I open my mouth and then clamp it shut, remembering to take a moment to think about it. I mean, I thought it was pretty clear. I'm not sure what I'm missing. I count my blinks so Mac knows I'm heeding his instructions. Leaning forward, I say, "A singer-songwriter."

"Because there's nothing wrong with just wanting to perform. A *lot* of amazing singers don't write their own songs. They breathe life into the track with their voice and style. There's no shame in that."

"The songs I just showed you..." I grimace. "I wrote all of those myself."

“I figured,” Mac says, nodding his head. My face falls in dismay. It’s the same sinking feeling I’d get any time a label would reject me. My instincts are kicking in, telling me to prepare for bad news. *Is Mac disappointed? Maybe he’s not willing to work with me...*

“I’m going to grab a drink, give y’all a minute. Feel me?” Sedi asks.

“Help yourself. My girlfriend makes homemade Arnold Palmers. It’s in a blue jug in the fridge.”

Sedi nods and basically flies up the stairs. I’m grateful that my best friend still knows me so well. Sedi understands I prefer to get bad news alone.

“It’s that bad?” I ask.

“You’re saying a lot without saying anything. What’s your vision for this EP? You only get four to six songs. That’s not a lot of time to tell a story. And all I’m hearing from your current lyrics is you like to pop bottles, get pussy, and hustle hard to get money. I mean is that actually your life?” He raises his brows at me. “That’s a rhetorical question. Reese told me you’re sleeping on your cousin’s couch.” *Yeesh*. “Look, I get the culture, but it works for some, not for others. In my opinion, it’s *tired*. It’s shallow. It’s—”

“Not me?”

He points his finger at me. “Exactly.”

“This is the stuff they told me to make in L.A.”

Mac scoffs and crosses his ankle over his other knee. “I’m sure they did. That shit is all assembly-line. Give me any top one hundred song these days, produced by the major labels, and I can tell you exactly what sound farm they swiped the loop from. There are probably less than twenty unique words in the lyrics and they built an empire off of repeating ‘oooh baby’ and describing good head. I mean don’t get me wrong”—he throws back his head and laughs—“sometimes good head is worth singing about.” I’m trying to focus but *yikes, my girlfriend’s dad just talked to me about good head...* Now I really do need a drink.

“My point is, Miles, there are plenty of great singers who launch a YouTube channel or release a few covers on Spotify, and they’re content. You can book small gigs and perform locally. Hell, you’re managing The Garage, right? You can book yourself every weekend if that makes you happy.”

“What are you saying?”

Mac rubs his hands together and clenches his jaw in what looks like dismay. “I only work on projects I’m *excited* about, and if I’m being completely honest—I’m not excited about this. It’s typical, repetitive, and trivial. I can’t connect to this. It’s exactly what’s wrong with the industry these days. I’m sorry, man. I don’t think there’s anything I can do with this.” He points to my notebook sitting on the leather coffee table as I try to swallow the bile in my throat.

For four years in L.A. I thought the problem was I didn’t have the right connections. Never once did I consider the fact that I wasn’t good enough.

“Your voice though, man...one of the best I’ve ever heard. I’m not knockin’ your vocals. There’s only one vocalist I know off the top of my head that can out-sing you.”

“Who?” I try to force a smile, but I feel like the wind got knocked out of me.

Mac rises to his feet and holds out his hand. A clear dismissal. “My daughter.” I force myself to shake his hand firmly. *Be a man about it, Miles*. He may not be your producer, but he’s still your girlfriend’s dad. In fact...

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Reyes. I’m grateful for the chance and I appreciate your honesty.” I twist my lips, trying to hold the words back, but I’m frustrated enough to push my own self-destruct button. “Since we’re no longer going to work together, I guess there’s no harm in letting you know that Reese and I are dating and I’m head-over-heels for your daughter.”

Mac cinches one eye closed as his hand tightens just a little around mine.

“But please don’t worry. I promise you, I’m a much better boyfriend than her last.”

**twenty-eight**

...



Hell hath no fury like a particularly pissed-off Reese Reyes, especially when it's pointed at my dad. In a show of protest, I skipped Sunday dinner with my parents and resigned to an evening in sweatpants and a *Pitch Perfect* marathon.

Here's what I know...

Miles called me on Wednesday night to tell me that he and my dad wouldn't be proceeding with the EP because he needed to focus on getting The Garage up and running. When I didn't believe that bullshit excuse, I called Sedi, who informed me that Dad basically donkey-kicked Miles right in the ego when he told him he was a shallow, talentless songwriter.

After ripping Dad a new one via text message, I promptly told him he could shove a pizza pocket where the sun don't shine, and he wouldn't be seeing me or my boyfriend for the foreseeable future. That went down three days ago and I'm still seething so hard that the steam coming out of my ears has me whistling like a tea kettle.

I'm just about to watch the Barden Bellas take the stage at regionals when there's a rapid knocking at the door. *Always with the interruptions!* I grumble as I yank my fuzzy throw off of my lap. It can't be Miles. He's having dinner with his family this evening. He invited me to go, and I should've accepted—I'm just still so angry. I was *not* good company on Friday at girls' night, or so Addie, Noa, Quinn, and Mani *all* told me. I didn't want to meet Miles's family when my head is

so full of hot rageful air that I feel like it's going to explode at any moment.

Looking through the peephole, it's someone I certainly didn't expect.

I rip the door open. "Petey?"

"Hey." His smile is small and cautious.

"Hey. *Wow*. You look so much better. How are you feeling?"

"Better, thanks to you. You're not sick?"

I hunch my shoulders and drop them. "I was sniffly for a day, but I got over it quick. I'm telling you, that stuff hits you too hard. You need to ask your doctor about why this stuff takes you down so hard. Maybe you're prone to bronchitis or something."

"Yeah, yeah, *Mom*."

*Well, you could use one.*

I see Petey's eyes begin to drop below my clavicle. I cross my arms, suddenly aware of how thin my tank top is, and the effectiveness of my push-up bra. "What are you doing here?"

"I feel like we just cleared the air and you're about to hate me again."

I narrow my eyes to slits. "What did you do? Because I warn you—my fuse is really short right now."

"Wait for it..." He holds up one finger in front of my face as he takes in a deep breath. Then, he looks over his shoulder and calls down the hallway. "Mac, she's home."

*Ah, fuck*. I try to slam the door, but it gets stuck on Petey's massive foot. "No," I seethe. "Dad and I aren't speaking at the moment."

"Hear him out." He flutters his lashes at me. "I'm not moving my foot, honey. Keep trying. I'm twice your size and am no longer suffering from the Bubonic plague."

"Bubonic. *Wow*. That's a big word for you, Petey."

He laughs at my teasing insult and it sounds like an echo from the past. It feels strangely familiar—like old times. But my smile is quickly wiped away when Dad appears in the doorway.

“Okay,” he says, holding up his palms, “just hear me out.”

“I *did* hear you out, Dad. When you told me you’d help Miles. I was sitting right there.” My hands find my hips as my temper explodes. “You said, *and I quote*, ‘I’ll give him a shot. Let’s you and I make an EP...together!’ What you didn’t say is that you were going to ask his fucking heart to go outside and bite the curb while you followed him out with a heavy boot. You *broke* him. He’s completely over it. If you wanted to be a condescending asshole, you could’ve picked anyone else. I told you Miles was important to me.”

Dad wears a bemused expression like he’s enjoying my tantrum. “Important enough to lie to your old man about him being your boyfriend?”

I pretend to check my nail beds. “That...is neither here nor there.” Petey does his best to pretend he’s not part of this conversation, even though he’s *literally* standing between me and my dad. “And what’s up with this?” I gesture at the minimal space between Petey and Dad. “You guys are already back up to your old antics?”

“Petey came by to talk...” He glances at Petey accusingly. “I thought you guys were okay, now?”

Petey shrugs innocently, so I answer for him. “We are. For about a millisecond. You guys are already working on something?”

“We’re just going with the flow—testing out some new sounds...”

“Well, you guys have fun. You can leave me and Miles out of it.” I glare at my dad. “If I need someone to break Miles’s spirit, there’s a whole wide world full of internet trolls and label gatekeepers to tell him he’s not good enough to live out his dreams. I don’t need you to pile on.”

“Oh, Reese,” Petey grumbles loudly. “He gave me the *same* speech.”

The door across the hall opens and Mrs. Mercer, my eighty-two-year-old, no more than ninety-pound neighbor, appears at the door wearing her floral nightgown and holding a bat. She eyes my dad and Petey coolly. “Reese, darling”—she tightens both hands around her Louisville slugger—“you need some help?”

I have to hold my breath so I don’t laugh at the visual of my geriatric little neighbor taking a few swings at these men. Heart of a fucking lion. I hope I’m half as fierce as Mrs. Mercer when I’m eighty.

“I’m sorry we’re being so loud,” I explain. “This is my dad, remember? And this is my friend—Petey. Do you know him? He’s big in the hip-hop music world.”

“Oh, I don’t listen to that mishegoss,” she mumbles. “I only like The Beatles.”

“They *are* a national treasure,” I say with a chuckle. “But I’m sorry if we disturbed you, Mrs. Mercer. We’ll keep it down. We were just headed inside. Have a good night.”

“You call me if you get into trouble, darling.” She shakes her bat in the air as Petey and Dad turn their backs and shuffle into my apartment. I give her a wink and shut the door behind them.

“So, this is your place?” Petey asks examining my quaint apartment. “It suits you.”

“Tiny?” I ask.

“No—just full of character.” He pats my decorative turquoise chair before wedging his ass into a seat that is most definitely too small for him.

“You missed dinner,” Dad states.

“I realize.”

“Reese—Sundays are our thing. You’re overreacting. And your mom was disappointed. Don’t drag her into the middle of this.”

*Okay, shit.* That's a fair point. Mom has been working really hard to relax and find more ways for us to connect. I should've texted her at least. I take in a deep breath and blow out the last remnants of my anger. "Dad, sarcasm aside, you blindsided me. Miles is so down on himself right now...he's *hurting*, and it's my fault. I didn't want to do that to him. *You* made me look like I was playing games with his head. I wouldn't have gotten him so excited about working with you if you didn't see potential."

"Of course I see potential. It's why I gave him the speech."

"What speech?"

"*The speech,*" Petey jumps in and emphasizes. I whip my head around to face him, my thick curls slapping my cheek. "I don't know if I ever told you this, but the very first day I got into the studio with Mac, he told me I was lazy, weak, and didn't have the confidence to make it in the rap game. He said my lyrics were choppy and better suited for slam poetry, or something like that."

Dad sucks in his lips, trying to hold in his smile. "I didn't say you were lazy..." He clears his throat. "I called you sloppy. There's a difference."

"Whatever he said, it pissed me off so much I wanted to prove him wrong. I locked the bedroom door and didn't come out for twenty-four hours. I wrote the first four songs of *Depth* in those twenty-four hours."

"What?"

Petey plants his elbows on his knees and leans forward. "Mac pushed me to find that fire and strive for more than what I was willing to settle for."

"Yeah, except at the time you were a resilient, cocky little shit," Dad says to Petey. "I didn't realize Miles would actually believe me." He rolls his eyes. "I asked Sedi if he was sensitive...he didn't prepare me."

"So, this is all some Jedi-mind-trick bullshit? Because it didn't work. Now, Miles wants to give up."

“Look, he’s talented, and the songs he wrote aren’t bad, but I think he could be great if he takes the time to search for a little more substance. I told you I’d teach you how to be a good producer, right?”

“Right...”

“A good producer takes the artist’s vision and makes it the best it can be. But a *great* producer helps the artist see a bigger, better vision. There’s your first lesson. Don’t let an artist that you think has big potential, settle for what everyone else is doing. If he’s different, honor that. Protect it. Don’t let him get washed out in the fray.” He shoots a glance at Petey.

“Thanks,” Petey undertones. “Real subtle, Mac.”

“I’m calling a spade a spade,” Dad says with a shrug. “You’re home, now.”

I blink at Dad, the hard lines on my face relaxing. “You think Miles has potential.”

“Definitely. He may feel bad at the moment, but how much do you want to bet he’ll get some good lyrics out of it? And if not, we’ll try a different approach. Being a songwriter and a performer are two different skill sets. He’s stronger in one than the other. We just have to take our time to help him develop the right way.”

“*Oh.*” Relieved, I throw my arms around my dad’s neck. “Sorry, I was so angry. I didn’t realize.”

He wraps me up in a bear hug and pats my back so hard, it winds me. “Bet you feel like shit, now.” I feel his smile against my cheek.

“Not really. You had it coming. Next time you want to play mind games with my boyfriend, loop me in first.” I remember the words as I say them. Shit, another obstacle. Releasing Dad, I study his expression. “Miles and I...”

“Yeah, he told me how head-over-heels he is for you.”

My jaw drops. Looking to my left, Petey’s does too. His surprise is evident. Our secret, officially out of the bag. *Head-*

*over-heels?* My smile is uncontrollable, spreading across my face—*wait!*

“You’re still going to help him?”

“Let me make myself crystal clear,” Dad says, shooting a side glance to Petey who shrivels in his seat and is suddenly very interested in my faux fur area rug. “Next man to break my daughter’s heart won’t have to deal with me. I’ll bring Abuela to the States to handle their ass.”

“Good,” I say with a laugh. I turn to Petey and give him a teasing smirk. “Know you were spared a major butt-kicking, my friend.”

But the sad expression he’s currently wearing—still full of surprise, but now mixed with anguish at the idea of me and Miles together...

Maybe he wasn’t spared a butt-kicking after all.

**twenty-nine**

...



“Hey baby, what’s up?” I ask distractedly as I scroll on my laptop, looking at local apartment listings. I’m still not one hundred percent sure what my salary as venue manager will be once Petey takes over, but I have the sneaking suspicion that I’m going to need a roommate to afford to live anywhere downtown. The alternative is living outside the city and dealing with a gnarly daily commute...then again that might be a fair trade-off to be able to afford food.

“Are you still at The Garage?” Reese asks through the phone. I pop my phone on speaker and lay it on the bar.

“Yes, ma’am, I am. The registers were installed today. I can officially charge you for drinks now.”

“Technically, I think I can charge *you* for drinks.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah...any word on that?” I’m still not sure who the actual owner of The Garage is going to be. We all got curveballs thrown at our heads last week.

“No, I haven’t asked.” She sighs. “I don’t want to push my luck. I doubt Petey’s feeling generous anymore and I’m not looking forward to losing what I never really had...”

It pains me. Reese is not a materialistic girl. The most I’ve been able to give her are some pretty exceptional orgasms, but it’s not like I’m wrapping diamonds around her neck and wrist. She asks for nothing. She’s content just as she is. And it kills me that the one thing that she’s excited about, I’m powerless to give to her. But her famous and successful ex-boyfriend sure can.

“Maybe he’ll still come through for you.”

“Hm, maybe.”

“What are you doing?”

“Taking a bath,” she says with an odd giggle.

“Oh really?” And now I understand her low laugh. “By yourself?”

There’s an audible click and I hear a low vibration against the water. “I may have brought a friend.”

“Bad girl. You know I don’t like sharing you,” I growl into the phone. “I’m heading over now. Unlock your door and then take your sexy ass right back into the tub—”

The sound of the front door opening and slamming shut alarms me. *Fuck*. I thought it was locked. “Someone is here,” I mumble. I am really not in the mood for an altercation. Who walks into a building that’s clearly closed and not open for business?

*Well, Reese that one time.*

But right now, it’s not my girl. Standing a few yards away from me at the entrance of the main floor is her ex-lover. He shows me his palm in a gesture of hello. I wave back as I take Reese off speakerphone.

“It’s Petey. Maybe he’s here to talk business.” Law told me he already signed the sale paperwork. I think it’s too late for him to forfeit ownership of The Garage. His name is in ink on the deal. Now, what he ends up doing with it is still up in the air...

“No—I sent him.”

“Why?” *Why are you sending Petey places?* I remind myself I’m trying *not* to play the jealous boyfriend. I keep my eyes locked on Petey as he makes his way over to me.

“Miles, I think you need to talk to someone who gets exactly how you’re feeling right now. I think you’re so amazing, but every time I tell you that, it falls on deaf ears.

You need to hear you're great from someone *you* think is great. Maybe that'll get your mojo back."

"My mojo?"

"Hey man," Petey says, standing right in front of me. "What's up?" Reese must hear his voice and takes her cue to hang up after telling me good luck and to call her later. "Can we uh...just clear the air right out the gate?"

I hold out my hand. "No need."

He takes my handshake and holds it firmly. "Yes, there's a need. I've seen my fair share of beefs over women in this industry. The worst thing for business is bad blood." He releases my hand.

I teeter my head from side to side in contemplation. "Do you have a problem with me, now?"

"I have an apology for you." Petey snorts in laughter as he pulls back the sleeves of his long black shirt. "My homeboy up North told me real OGs don't apologize. I guess I have to give up my card because I've apologized more in the past week than I've done in the past five years."

"Gangsters don't apologize, huh? That's a new one."

"He's a damn fool." Petey rolls his eyes and pops his middle finger in the air, conveying his sentiment about his so-called homeboy. "And so am I. I had no idea you and Reese were—"

"We were trying to keep it to ourselves because of Mac."

"Right, right...well, I spent a long time working through the haze of years of bad decisions and stupid mistakes. I felt like a new man and I just wanted to start over. I guess I forgot that when you walk away, other people's lives move on. Reese has a new life and she's happy and I didn't stop to think that..." He flicks his fingers back and forth anxiously. "She wasn't waiting around for me to pull my head out of my ass. She made a new life."

"Seems that way."

“She told me how she feels about you, and I’m happy for you guys. Don’t make the same mistakes I did.” I see his tortured smile before he runs his hand over his face. “There’s only one Reese, and there are no second chances.”

“Thank you.” I hold out my hand again, this time less of a greeting, more of a truce. Petey clasps his hand over mine, eagerly. “I appreciate it.”

“Cool, man.” Petey looks around The Garage. “This place looks about ready to go. The new colored lights look hella good. We’ve got some nightclub vibes.”

I laugh. “Reese’s idea. She didn’t want to make big changes, but she said we needed a little pizazz.”

“Good call.”

“Speaking of which, are you still gifting this place to her, or did you change your mind?”

Petey’s eyes furrow. “*Of course*. I just have to make sure it’s not a money pit first. I don’t want her taking on a bunch of debt. Why would I change my mind?”

“Because she’s with me...”

A cloudy look fills his eyes, like a storm brewing. “Have you ever heard Reese sing?”

I shake my head. “Actually, no.”

“That girl’s voice,” he mutters. “She’d sweep the Grammys if she’d make an album. She’s got Adele’s power, Beyonce’s style, and Mariah’s range.”

“Why doesn’t she sing?”

“Because Reese has known *exactly* who she is and what she likes since she was twelve years old. She wanted to run the studio like Mac. That was always the game plan. When we put *Depth* together, she was on her way. When we moved to Atlanta, she’d stay locked in the studios, just watching and learning. Producing is tough for women to break into, especially in hip-hop if you don’t already have an in...but she was so determined.” Petey shakes his head. “But I bled her energy dry. Instead of working on her craft and pursuing her

dreams, she spent all her time carrying my ass. She was my girl, my manager, my muse...she didn't have time for herself."

"But she left, didn't she? Atlanta?" *She left you.*

"Yeah—and then what was rough became hell. At the end of things, I think hating me made her also hate the version of herself she was with me. She thought being wrong about me made her wrong about everything. Mac told me with you, she's her old self again—happy and confident. You inspired some sort of comeback for her."

I can't help but smile, because honestly, I feel much the same. Something came alive in me when I met Reese. "What does that have to do with The Garage?"

"I feel like I stole a part of her life," Petey says, grazing the diamond stud in his ear with the pad of his thumb like a dog with a nervous tick. "So, I'm trying to give a part back, maybe. I don't want her to lose herself again."

"She won't," I say firmly. *I won't let her.*

"You don't have a problem with it, do you?"

"Not at all. I think it was always inevitable I'd end up working for Reese. It seems like the natural order of things that eventually, she'd own my ass."

He laughs hard. "Damn straight. That girl is all kinds of fire."

It's insane that we're bonding like this. Petey was on every mental vision board I'd ever created. He's my idol. He's had everything I've ever wanted—including my girl. I didn't think we'd find common ground like this. But peace feels better than a feud. I'm glad he came with an apology versus an ultimatum to back down. Because I'd hate to have to fight my hero.

"Hey, you want a drink?" I duck behind the long bar and pull out an unopened bottle of Jack Daniels. "You like Jack and Coke? Single or double?"

"I'm actually not a big drinker, man." He pats his jeans pocket and I can see the outline of what looks like a very thick cigarette. He cocks one eyebrow at me. "You partake?"

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“What’s weird about stars is that they’re only outside,” I mumble, watching the ceiling of The Garage which seems to be moving. It’s nice. I could lay flat on this comfortable concrete floor forever. “Stars should be for like...for inside too.”

Petey, lying next to me, laughs as I hold out my hand, asking for the blunt. “No, bro. ‘Stars should be for inside too’? You’re done.” He snuffs out the tip in our makeshift ashtray—a blue Solo cup.

“You’re not feeling it?” I ask, fighting the urge to laugh at everything I say.

“Oh, I’m feeling it, but you’re on Mars, my friend.”

“Fuck,” I say with a chuckle. “You’re right though.” By some miracle, I’m able to sit up. Rising to my feet, I float over to the bar and pull two room-temperature water bottles from the underneath storage area. “Water?” I hold a bottle out to Petey.

“Please.” He downs half of it in a few glugs. “So, when are you getting your ass back to the studio? Mac’s waiting.”

I snort. “Oh, Petey Pete the Sneak...Mac doesn’t want to work with me. Didn’t he tell you?”

“*Petey Pete the Sneak?* Shit man—no one’s called me that in half a decade. Reese used to hate that nickname,” he mutters before he finishes the rest of his water and crumples it in his hand. “Do we recycle?”

*Who the hell is this guy?* Recycles. Humble. Shares his weed. He’s a genuinely friendly guy. They say don’t meet your idols—but fuck, are they wrong.

I snatch up the bottle and throw it in a brown package box. It’s where I’ve been hoarding the plastic and aluminum recycling until our trash service officially starts. “Sorry,” I mumble.

“For what?”

“The nickname, I didn’t mean to offend you—”

“Oh, I’m not offended. Everyone thought *sneak* meant I was running around on her, but the nickname came from my boys in Atlanta who said I came out of nowhere. I was just this wannabe from little ol’ Denver that no one thought would amount to anything, and somehow my first album upset the whole industry. They called it a sneaky takeover.”

“She didn’t understand?” I ask, taking a sip from my bottle, enjoying the feel of the cool water coating my throat that’s still on fire.

“It’s hard not to be paranoid and jealous when you’re a woman put in that position. And I didn’t give her...” Petey runs his hands over his cornrows and looks at his all-black sneakers with a pause. “Enough attention, I guess.” He shrugs. “There’s a lot of pressure to sell the sex appeal. *Single* is sexy in hip-hop. Committed relationships only work well for country stars.”

“What? That’s garbage, man. If you’re in love, why hide it?”

“You’ll see,” he singsongs.

“I seriously doubt that. Maybe R&B stars need to look single, but bar managers? We get to be old, bald, beer-bellied, happily married men.”

Petey tsks his tongue. “You’re going to walk away that easy? All because Mac was testing you a little? Come on, man. You have more fight in you than that, don’t you?”

I shake my head and feel the entire room shift. I widen my eyes as if that could help my double vision. “It’s not just Mac...I was in L.A. for a long time and got rejected left and right. I thought it was because I wasn’t getting seen. I didn’t realize it was because I wasn’t any good. I don’t want to settle for singing covers. I wanted to make music...I thought I had something.”

“You do. You *have* something, Miles. Now you have to go make something *great*.”

Crumpling my empty water bottle, I toss it behind me and miss the brown box. Grumbling, I retrieve my trash. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Mac’s a little salty about major labels.”

“Yeah...why?”

“Because he used to work for one. They paid him well. He worked with a lot of big names, and he hated his life.”

I blink, trying to focus, but my voice and Petey’s sound like an echo. “Why?”

“Because it was the same antiquated bullshit on repeat—money, pussy, crew love, thug life, West Coast, East Coast. People were pumping out singles left and right, hitting the top of the charts with...garbage. It frustrated him to no end. And not just the music, he hated seeing how the artists were treated. It was more about deadlines and appearances than it was about the music. They built an entire industry off of someone’s image. Music became a byproduct of fame.”

Lifting my heavy eyes, I watch Petey’s lips twitch. “Really?”

“Oh yeah. I signed my life away when I signed with Elite. Mac warned me. He wouldn’t work with a label, ever again. I chose money and fame because I thought it meant security. And for a long time, I had to watch the dough roll in, while my soul seeped out. That’s why I’m back. Seven years, four albums, and I’m done. I’ll never make another album again unless Mac produces it.”

I feel my buzz lessen, chased away by the importance of this conversation. “I always thought the path was make a demo, get a deal, *then* make an album. The producers who worked on my demo wouldn’t even let me listen to the track until I got to the studio. Then it was just about wrapping up as quickly as possible because the room was booked back-to-back. I’m not used to someone looking at me this closely.”

“Mac is really thorough. A visionary. He sees everything.”

“I’m kind of afraid he’s seeing something I’m not.” I swallow audibly. “Maybe I was too sure of myself. If I had



what it takes, I probably would've been noticed by now."

Petey takes a deep breath in and blows it out. "You know they tell you to have a thick skin in this industry."

"Yeah, I've heard that before."

Petey cackles, almost maniacally. "You don't need thick skin...you need to be fucking bulletproof with blinders on." Cupping his hands, he places them on either side of his temple, demonstrating his point. "Like those racehorses that only see the finish line."

"What's the finish line?"

He points directly at my chest across the bar. "That's the thing, there is no finish line. You have to pursue music because you love it. Even though you know it won't love you back. Mac warned me when I first started out that if there was anything else I could find happiness doing—literally anything that could fulfill me—I should do that instead because this path hurts like hell. I've been doing this for a decade and it feels like torture more often than not."

"Sounds like I'm giving up at the right time," I mumble.

Petey shakes his head. "If this is what you're meant to do, walking away is worse than going through hell. Even if you don't amount to what you hope, not trying hurts ten times worse."

"So, my options are hurt a lot, or hurt a whole lot more?"

He laughs heartily. "Sounds about right."

Petey's phone rings from his pocket. He doesn't check it, just silences it through his pocket. "That's my ride, man." *When did he call for a ride? What time is it? Okay, how high am I?* "Come by Mac's this week. This time, I'll be there. Reese will be there. Your DJ friend is helping Mac. You have a lot of people in your corner, Miles. You can do this, and when you can't—lean on your friends."

My shoulders rise and fall dramatically as I try to pull more air into my lungs. "He said my songs were shallow. He didn't connect with them."

Petey clamps one eye shut. “Mac’s dramatic when he wants to make a point. You shouldn’t—”

“No...it sucks because...I agree.” Still feeling parched, I grab another round of water bottles from beneath the bar. After sliding one to Petey, I untwist a cap and chug. “What makes a good R&B song?”

“Every great R&B artist I know sings about love. Finding it, losing it...making love,” Petey says with a shrug.

“That’s a given, but how do you make people *connect*?”

His phone buzzes again, but this time he ignores it. “You know why you probably favor *Depth*?”

“Why?”

“Because I was hella honest. At the time I was broke, hopeless, scared, and in love when I wrote that album. I was vulnerable and I didn’t hold anything back. I told everyone exactly what my life was like. My last few records were smoke and mirrors. *Depth* was the only album where I was really honest. I wrote about all the bullshit with my dad leaving, then my mom. I felt like my life was over before it started. I wrote about falling in love, and how scared I was to fail. That’s what makes a good album. Brutal honesty. Write about the life you have now, not about the one you wish you did.”

“It’s that simple?”

“It’s *that* simple, man. Be honest. Just...sing your secrets.”

My head is shaking from side to side, but my words don’t match. “Okay, I’ll try it.”

“Good. I’ll see you soon then.” Petey looks me up and down. “Wait, do you need a ride? You shouldn’t drive like this.”

I nod toward the stage. “I’m going to stay behind. Ride the high... See what happens.”

“All right,” he says, patting my shoulder. “Seriously don’t drive fucked up. Reese is a stickler about that. She’ll kick your ass.”

With that, he's out the door and it slams heavily behind him. I wiggle my fingertips in front of my face, watching them blur in movement like a hallucinogenic dream.

*What secrets do I have? And who would honestly want to hear them?*

Taking Petey's advice, I pull out my phone and call Reese.

"Hi," I say with a sleepy tone. She immediately notices the difference in my voice.

"Are you? *High?*" I chuckle like an idiot instead of responding and I hear her growl in irritation. "Fucking Petey," she grumbles, and I hear her shuffling in the background. "Don't you dare touch your keys, Miles. It's the same thing as driving drunk. I'm coming to get you."

"Reese, can I tell you a secret?"

"Sure." I can tell she's put the phone down. I imagine she's tugging on sweatpants and a hoodie, on her way to rescue me once again.

"I don't think I can do this—make an album."

"Why?"

"Because I want it so much, it's going to hurt so bad when it doesn't happen."

"What?" she asks clearly, the phone back on her ear. "Why would you say that?"

"Because all the odds are stacked against me and I'm not sure if I'm going to live up to my expectations, or yours. What if I never *make it*? What was this all for?"

"You know what, Miles?... I hope you don't—*make it*."

"What?"

"Yeah." I hear her apartment door slam behind her, her keys jingling in her hand. "I hope we make an album together, and I hope it goes nowhere, so when you don't make a dime, and I'm still standing right there next to you—maybe you'll finally realize the journey was the best part, and that I love you

regardless.” There’s a silent beat. “*Shit!* Wait, how high are you? Any chance you won’t remember I said that?”

“Zero chance. I’m going to text myself right now so I don’t forget.”

“*Shit.*”

“Goddamn, Reese. You just said I love you for the first time...*over the phone.* Classy.”

“Shaddup,” she gripes and I picture her eyes rolling. The sound of her ignition tells me she’s already in her car, on the way to see me. I wait patiently as her Bluetooth connects. “How close are you?”

“About five minutes away.”

“Then we still have time...”

“For what?”

“Another secret...”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

“Oh, nothing major.” I smile into the phone. “Just...I love you too.”

**thirty**

...

“Are you...uh...making moonshine?” Quinn asks, hunching over with her head in my fridge. She’s spotted the rows of mason jars half filled with questionable brown liquid.

My shoulders bounce as I chuckle. “Uh, no. That’d be Miles’s kombucha. His mom made him a fresh batch.” Miles is a little ritualistic in the studio. For the past month, since the first time we said we loved each other, he’s been a machine. Animalistic. He doesn’t drink alcohol, coffee, or smoke—nothing. No vices. He wants a clear head...except he’s barely been sleeping. “I think she’s concerned. He’s been working so hard on this album for the past few weeks, we only get alone time when he crashes here.” And much to my dismay, by *alone time* I mean him falling asleep next to me. My favorite toy and I have gotten reacquainted as Miles eats, drinks, and breathes his new music.

A little spark of motivation ignited into a forest fire. I’m not sure what force possessed him, but Miles unleashed his creativity through the most soulful, sexy, and original songs I could’ve dreamt up. I’ve never seen anyone write such a fucking fantastic EP that fast. It’s been all hands on deck.

Dad’s been running the studio like a skilled head coach. He’s teaching all of us as we go. Sedi’s become quick on the boards, learning to anticipate Dad’s sound requests before he even makes them. I’ve learned more about good production in the past month than I have in ten years looking over his shoulder. What I’ve learned is simple—don’t stifle the sound

by what you think should happen. Just set the rhythm and then give the song room to grow.

Plant the anchor...then let it flow.

Even Petey's been hanging around, pitching in while trying to develop a concept for his next project. Never in my wildest imagination did I think my ex-boyfriend and my new boyfriend could fuel each other creatively. What a strange place I'm in. Who knew forgiveness could have a ripple effect? It took time to fully mend my heart, and now it's beating stronger than ever.

I want to get lost in this beautiful, lyrical, beat-heavy, melody-rich world where I never have to pull a set of headphones off my ears again. But unfortunately, I'm still stuck in two worlds. A tale of two very different cities. Distracted by the increasingly annoying thing called a full-time job.

"Where's Miles tonight?" Addie asks as she shifts uncomfortably in my stiff chair. "Okay, by the way—this chair is really pretty, but it's the most uncomfortable thing I've ever sat on."

Mani pats the floor next to her and Noa. "There's room down here, Baby Bear."

"You guys are the ones who suggested we do girls' night here. We should've gone to Quinny's," I protest. Joel's brothers are in town visiting, so Addie's home is currently under siege. We had to take our weekly tradition elsewhere.

"My building's roof is being worked on. It's been loud as fuck for an entire week. I don't know how Cody sleeps right through it."

"Um, I lived with Cody, and if you can sleep through his snoring, you can sleep through roof maintenance," Addie says, sliding to the floor, resting her back against the seat of my stiff, European-style high-backed chair.

"Cody's snoring is endearing. Like a gruff, sexy muffler. A jackhammer above my head at three in the morning is a whole different story. It makes me want to Spartan kick someone off

the roof.” Quinn says, smoothing her flyaway hair on top of her head. She’s still in her silk business suit, so I know she came straight from the office to meet us.

“A sexy, gruff muffler?” I ask, raising one brow. “You really are whipped.”

“You should talk.” She pulls out a chilled bottle of wine from the fridge. “I have half a mind to yank down your pants to see if ‘Miles’ is tattooed across your ass yet.”

With a snarky smile, I turn around and pull down my cotton shorts to show her my bare ass. “Still clear. And to answer your earlier question, *Addie*,” I say, throwing Quinn a look as I pull back up my bottoms, “Miles is waiting on an email with a potential deal with Elite Records that Petey got him. Can you believe that shit?” With the songs taking form so fast, Petey had the grand idea to pitch Miles to his old label. With Petey’s endorsement, the response was instant. An offer came swiftly. After five years of chasing a deal with no luck, Miles was finally seen. He didn’t believe it at first. The memory of his smile mixed with tears on his face, when he realized all his hard work was finally paying off, is etched into my brain forever.

“I don’t understand,” Addie says, “I thought you guys were going to release the album independently.”

“Yeah, Miles still will. But because of the songs Dad and Miles put together, Elite Records is interested in signing Miles for his next album. A *full* album. It’s full funding for development, promotion, marketing, and everything else he needs. When it goes through, Miles will be getting the fattest paycheck of his life.” I scoff. “I’m going to make him upgrade our date nights from Applebee’s to Olive Garden...just saying.” My uncontrollable smile turns into a half-laugh.

“You seem really happy, Reese,” Noa says with the warmest smile.

“Well, he does that to me.”

“No, not just because of Miles,” she continues. “It’s something about you getting in the studio again.” She twists



her wrist in the air. “It’s bringing this *light* out of you. It’s like when I start painting on a new canvas and I just feel *alive*. That inspired, imaginative piece of your soul shouldn’t be dependent on any man. With or without Miles, promise me you’ll stay exactly like this.” She blows a kiss in my direction.

I hold up my phone and pull up a blank note. “Okay, I’m going to need you to say that again, slowly.”

“You’re taking notes?”

“Yeah, that sounded great. I’m going to need a convincing speech when I tell my mom I’m quitting Henley & Associates.”

“Oh, ho, ho! She’s going to lose her shit,” Quinn adds, unhelpfully. “If I were you, I’d go into that conversation with full body armor.”

“*Thank you, Quinny.*” I muster as much sarcasm as possible in my response before lobbing a pillow at her head. I miss, but I notice Addie’s puckered bottom lip and her arms wrapped around each other.

“What’s wrong, Bear?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like Miles, but everything is changing so fast.” She circles her finger around the room pointing to each member of our little group.

“Not true,” I mutter. “Nothing’s changing with us—”

“No, no, it’s good. Change is *good*. Actually, I’ve been thinking lately that our friendships need to change too.”

“What?” Mani asks with a tone indicating she’s offended.

“We’re not *just* a sisterhood anymore. We’ve grown into a big family.” She looks at Noa. “We were all there when you had Jonah, he’s always felt like our own. But now Presley is our little peanut too, and not just because she’s your goddaughter, but because she’s Chase’s daughter. We love him.” She nods toward Quinn. “Cody’s not just my friend, he calls me his little sister. And honestly Quinny, at this point, you fuck with Cody’s heart, and you fuck with mine.”

Quinn's lips fall open as her eyes freeze in wide circles. "Did she just threaten me? About my own husband?"

I snort, picturing the baby of our group taking on boss lady Quinn. "We've already planned out Joel's kidnapping, murder, and the eventual cover-up if he gets cold feet and leaves you before your wedding," I say with a dead-serious expression.

"I think you're missing my point," Addie grumbles.

"No, no," I explain, "I get what you're saying. Joel means a lot to us. We care about him and we're going to feel *very bad* if we have to murder him."

Ignoring my sass, Addie continues, "And we're all going to be front row at the opening of The Garage watching Miles perform like a herd of fangirls because we're proud of him and what he's accomplished. And whenever Mani decides to tell us who she's secretly sleeping with, we'll adopt him too."

Mani rolls her eyes but stays silent throughout the matter.

"Where are you going with all this, Addie?" Quinn asks as she stretches her tan arms above her head, trying to relieve pressure from her aching back from sitting on the hard floor. *All right, fine...I'll think about some new furniture.*

"Maybe we keep girls' night to every other Friday?"

"What?" Noa asks.

"*The hell?*" Mani adds on.

"No, ma'am," Quinn says with certainty.

Addie claps her hands together above the medley of objections. "*Girls' night every other week* and family night for the Fridays in between—with all the people we love. Boyfriends, husbands, babies...our *whole* family."

*Oh, Addie.* Sweet, sassy, sentimental Addie. "I like that." I smile as I raise my imaginary glass in the air. "Cheers to that."

Five hands raise in the air and we can almost hear the imaginary clinks.

My phone buzzes loudly on my glass coffee table and doesn't let up. Snagging it off the table, I walk toward my

bedroom to take the call when I see Miles's name pop up on the screen.

"Hey, you," I say as my cheeks bunch. "We were just talking about you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. You have a formal invitation to girls' night next weekend. Or family night, I suppose. At any rate, it's a mandatory play date with all my friends and their significant others."

"That's cool," he mumbles. "Can't wait."

*Okay, I was expecting a little more enthusiasm than that.* "What's wrong? Did you get the email?"

"Yeah. They sent over a draft of the deal."

I shut my bedroom door with the heel of my foot. Sucking in a deep breath, I ask, "Miles, if it's not enough, there are other labels. This is just the beg—"

"It's enough. The advance is millions."

*"Baby! That's incredible! Good. You're damn worth millions, I'm glad they're offering what you're worth."* I wait through the silence. "What's wrong?"

"It's just..." He falls silent again and I press the phone harder against my ear. "I know I'm not allowed to have you on Fridays, but..."

"Do you need me tonight?"

"Yeah," he breathes out. "I do."

I hear the laughter of my best friends in the world through the door. If they were listening to this call on speakerphone, if they could hear the anguish in Miles's voice, I know exactly what they'd say.

"Just tell me where to meet you. I'm on my way."

**thirty-one**

...

Walking down the stairs to the basement, I tuck my phone into my sweatpants pocket.

“What do you think?” Mac asks as the music fades and the studio falls silent again. “I’m happy. I’m *really* happy with it, but if you want to try the hook again in a falsetto, we can see how it flows.”

I can’t help but stare at the awards on Mac’s wall—platinum singles, multiple Grammys, and other awards framed in glass that I don’t recognize. “I’m happy if you’re happy.”

He holds up his palm. “No,” he says firmly. “I asked if *you’re* satisfied. You’re not here to get my approval. I’m here to make sure this EP is something you’re proud of.” He raises his thick, dark brows. “And you should be.”

I snort out loud. “This coming from the man who said he wasn’t excited to work with me.”

“Eh,” he says swiveling in his executive chair in front of his DAW, “I stand by it. Look at what I was able to pull out of you.” He points to the sound booth I originally thought was very impressive. But at the present moment, it feels like a prison cell seeing as I’ve been living in a soundproof box for two weeks straight.

“Does it even matter? If I sign that contract—do we own the songs? I just don’t understand.”

I’m glad I was with Mac when the email from Elite Records came through. My eyes went immediately to the section about the advance. I just wanted to see if it was enough

to get the student loan creditors off my back and afford a place of my own. But what I read was so much more daunting. I still don't understand all the fine print.

Folding his hands, Mac touches his fingertips to his lips. "Do you want me to talk to you as a producer, or your girlfriend's dad?"

"Can I get both?"

"How much do you really know about working with labels?"

"Not much. I've been told to fight for my masters if I can."

"I can ask Robin to comb over this if you'd like." He points to the stack of papers that we printed out and laid out on the coffee table. "But from what I can tell, it's a pretty boilerplate 360 deal. That's why they're offering you so much up front. They pay you a lot, but they are going to take a big cut of everything."

"I don't understand what that means..."

"It means...fuck masters, Miles. They won't just own your music. They'll own *you*. Signing this contract gives them the authority to decide how many records you produce, when you release, when you tour, what merch you sell. This can even go as far as deciding how you represent yourself as a brand."

"How so?" I glance at all the papers. It's so many words. Why do we need these many rules to make music?

"I've seen some labels go as far as deciding what an artist wears, what restaurants they can be seen at, *who* they can be seen with. You have zero autonomy in your creative decisions. In exchange, they'll pay for everything. But believe me when I say they're going to make their money back. Look, from someone who's been in this industry a long time, I'll tell you, you'd be hard-pressed to find another deal like this. Take it as a compliment. Labels aren't taking risks on new artists like this anymore, so if you need validation—here it is. You're good, and you've got something special, Miles."

Pulling off my hat and setting it to the side, I suck in my lips and meet Mac's gaze. "And as my girlfriend's dad? What

would you tell me to do?”

“Why don’t you ask Petey how his 360 deal with Elite worked out. I bet he’ll tell you it cost him his relationship. It’s the only reason I’ve let him back into my life and my studio. That label changed him, all the shitty decisions he made—weren’t really his. He was playing a part. *For seven years*, he played a part.”

Covering my face, I groan into my hands as I sink into Mac’s leather couch. The cushions look a little more worn than they did two weeks ago. This couch is where we wrote, jammed, ate, and napped. We worked like we were frenzied.

“I don’t know what to do. This is all I’ve wanted my whole life.” But now, there are other things I want too, just as much. “I’m going to meet Reese at The Garage and talk to her about all this. If I sign this contract, they’ll want me back in L.A. immediately.”

Mac leans forward in his chair, popping his fists off each other as he talks. I’ve learned he likes to keep his hands busy. If he’s not fiddling on the soundboard, he’s fidgeting in one way or the other. “You sure you don’t want to sleep on it for a night? Miles, you guys aren’t married. This is your decision, not Reese’s.”

*I don’t think that’s true.*

All my girl has done is support me, help me, and encourage me. She gives me space when I need to work, and she wraps me up with comfort when I need her even more. I wrote *all* these songs...*about her...for her.*

After Petey told me to write down all my secrets, I did exactly that. I bravely wrote everything in my heart down in a notebook and paired it with the melodies in my head.

The first song was to tell Reese how thankful I was she saw me the day we met. She *really* saw me. The second was to tell her that I saw her too—her wit, her charm, the way she’s brave behind her sass, but the way she’s vulnerable with her heart. The third song was to tell her she’s the first girl I’ve ever loved like this. I’ve never been so sure, so fast of

anything in my life. The fourth song was sexy, and I'll admit, that was fucking awkward to record in front of Mac, but it's Reese's favorite. "Huge deal" speaks for itself, because when Reese and I make love, just like I promised—it's everything.

The final song for the EP was a medley of concern. It talked about pain I haven't even gone through yet. I wrote about how I'd feel if I lost her or let her down and caused her pain. What if I accidentally break her, the way Petey did? When you give your whole heart to someone, when every smile you have starts with just one person, what remains if they walk away?

"Secrets" was my most painfully honest song. I laid all my worst fears on the track, just like Petey said I should. It worked. If we had to pick a racehorse to bet on, if I could pull a single from this EP that would make my career—it'd be "Secrets."

"Mac, Reese believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. These songs only exist because of her." I twist my hat back around my head before I rise. "She has a say."



**thirty-two**

...

I pull up to The Garage and spot Miles sitting on the curb under a bright lamppost. Now that we're a week away from being an operable business, I guess the city finally decided to replace the bulbs in the lamp that was broken for years.

I throw my car in park, then I join Miles under the dusky hue lighting up his solemn expression.

"Well, hey there." I give him a half smile, trying to feel out his mood. I nod toward the takeout bag sitting beside him. "I know I'm not exactly high maintenance, but dinner on the curb?" I turn up my nose. "Come on."

He can't help but chuckle as he rises to his feet and wraps his thick arm around my back, yanking me into him. His kiss is different. Desperate—like he's trying to decide something from the taste of my tongue. He groans into my mouth like he's relieved.

"I forgot how good you feel."

"Oh really?" I ask. Letting my hand trail down his hard stomach, I dance over the bumps of his abs. I look for his eyes when I land on the waistband of his athletic sweatpants. "Would you like more of a reminder of how good I feel? Let me take you home."

With a quick kiss on the top of my head, he steps away. "Stop tempting me," he says with a playful smile. *There he is. That's my guy.* His dimples deepen, accentuating his five o'clock shadow. His beard is long gone, but his stubble is in full force. My face is still warm from the friction of his cheek

against mine as he kissed me like he was trying to swallow me whole. “I recreated our first date.” He points to the bag with Out West’s logo.

“I think our first date involved *not* dancing, me watching you puke, and a pretty gnarly migraine.”

“Hey,” he says with a glower, “what came after the migraine more than made up for that shit date.”

I turn up my lips and shrug my shoulders. “So you say...”

“Woman.”

I laugh. “Kidding. You’re the best I’ve ever had, baby. Do you want me to play that Drake song and serenade you right now?”

His chuckle is genuine but falls short. “Sit down and eat with me.”

I’m not remotely hungry, but I have a feeling this isn’t about an actual meal. Miles is trying to remind himself of something. I wait patiently as he unwraps the French dip sandwich and tears it in two. He pulls out the cardboard container of au jus sauce and of course doesn’t touch it.

“No kettle chips?”

“They were out.”

“They can run out of kettle chips?”

He takes a bite and rolls his shoulders. “Apparently, they only make them fresh, and they turn off the fryers at eight. I’ve never actually been to Out West at night.”

“Me either,” I say before dunking my half into the beefy broth. No kettle chips but the sandwich is so good as usual, my appetite kicks up a bit. I take another small bite before I finally urge Miles to speak his mind.

“Is the paperwork getting to you?”

Dropping his sandwich on the wrapper that’s laid out between us, he blows out a long, deep breath. “I’ve chased this for so long, I didn’t even realize what they were asking for.”

“Does my dad think it’s a good deal?”

“He explained to me what a 360 deal is.”

“*Shit.*”

“You’re familiar?”

*Very.* It’s a stress-inducing, mental torture chamber of a deal for most. I can’t speak for all artists, but I know what it did to one. Petey would’ve been in severe debt to his label if he wasn’t smart enough to keep *Depth* a completely different entity. Everything he created outside of his first album was fair game. He could’ve sold lemonade on the side of the street and Elite would’ve wanted a cut.

“I thought they didn’t do those kinds of deals anymore.”

“I guess it’s the only deal Elite offers to new artists. It’s a security measure. When you work out the math of the advance, and the royalties they want, I’d be the richest broke dude on the planet...”

Nodding, I say, “Paying that money back drives artists to crazy extremes.”

“Like what?” His wide eyes are glistening under the yellow light.

I put my sandwich down and brush the crumbs off my hands. “Like having to always appear single to sell more meet and greets and VIP tickets to women who just want you to slip up once, have your baby, or at least cause a scandal the record company will have to pay to go away. Or, being encouraged—and by encouraged, I pretty much mean *forced*—to date reality TV stars or up-and-coming singers for publicity purposes. Doing year-long tours, back-to-back. Losing complete creative control over your songs, your lyrics... Everything just becomes a desperate attempt to crawl out of the debt well they shoved you down.”

“Is that what happened to you and Petey?”

Planting my hands on the curb behind me, I lean back and stretch my legs in the street. “It was a combination of things. Neither of us was prepared for that life.” I suck in the crisp

night air. “It took him weeks to notice the promise ring he gave me on his nightstand. I packed up my shit, moved out of his apartment, and I was home in Denver, already moving in with my new friends before he called me and asked if I planned on coming back. That’s how out of it Petey was at the time. It took him so long to realize I didn’t want that life anymore because he stopped seeing me. He was so wrapped up in what he was doing, and I was just floating through my life, waiting until he needed me again.”

“If I take this deal, will that happen to us?”

My eyes fall to my lap as I clamp my teeth together. *I don’t know...*

“You’re not Petey,” I say as I place my hand over his. “And we’re not teenagers.”

“What do you want me to do? They want me to head out to L.A. soon; they already have a producer in mind. They want to start fresh with a new album and have it ready to promo in a couple months.”

“Goddamn,” I say as I squeeze his fingers. “You just wrote five songs, now you have to write twelve more? You’re going to get burnt out.”

“From what I understand, I won’t be writing them. Just singing... You can say it by the way.”

“Say what?”

“That I’m selling out.”

Biting the inside of my lip, I absorb the news. I won’t say it, but it’s swimming somewhere near the forefront of my mind. “But more people would hear your music this way. With indie, you may reach tens of thousands in the first couple of years. With Elite Records, millions would hear you in a week. Maybe that’s worth it?”

“Would you go with me?” He doesn’t look at me as he asks, he just stares at his shoes. I do the same, noticing the scuff mark on the toe of his white sneakers.

*Say something, Reese. Anything.*

But, I can't. I don't have the answer he wants.

"It's okay," he grumbles, "it's too much to ask—"

"No, it's not too much. I love you. It's just..." I wrap my hand around his back. "I lost myself in Petey. That's why our breakup was so devastating. I only had one purpose—*one* thing that made me happy, and my entire identity was wrapped up in one person. I need to figure out what I want to do—what makes *me* happy."

"Would you consider it eventually? Tour with me?"

"Maybe," I whisper. The truth is, I need to see what Miles will be like when someone hands him a thick wallet, a flashy new car, and every pretty girl he passes bats an eye at him. That's the real test. Petey was a knight once upon a time. Then, he fell from grace. I know better than to simply trust spoken promises from a man. We need time.

Miles shifts his weight so he's leaning back on one hand. He pulls me against his chest, tucking my hair out of his face as my back lines his chest. He whispers in my ear. "I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose *you*." He kisses from my earlobe, down my neck and I lean into his lips, letting the warm desire rush through me. "But I don't want to lose *me* again either."

---

## miles

I'm not sure why she doesn't just say it. All signs point to the inevitable. I take this deal, and Reese and I are over. Her heart is here. I told her I was staying here. In fact, the first time we met and shared a sandwich on this very curb, I didn't ask for her number because I didn't want to lead her on just to leave her behind.

The irony.

"Would you be able to find someone else to manage The Garage, if I leave?"

"Uh, yeah." She tilts her head back to stare at me upside down. "Me, of course."

"It's a full-time job, how are you going to pull that off?"

"I talked to my boss, Eli, about transitioning. They are going to let me move to part-time, keep my benefits, and then once there's some solid revenue from The Garage, they'll phase me out. They're being really supportive."

"If I do go, I'll make sure Petey signs over The Garage to you first. I'm not going to walk away and have the rug pulled out from under you."

She nods. "Thank you, but we talked. We're okay. And he's sticking around anyway."

My jaw tenses. I'd go as far as calling Petey a friend, now. But I still don't trust him around Reese. It's not his fault, I don't trust anyone around Reese. If the roles were reversed, I'd call him an idiot for leaving her behind, alone.

"So, what happens next?" she asks in the smallest voice I've ever heard come out of her.

"Um, unless I counter with any red lines, they're coming to the show next week with the final paperwork. They're sending an agent, so I can sign in person."

“I’m so happy for you, Miles.”

“Right,” I mutter.

“What?” she asks, noticing my tone. “What’s wrong? I’m trying to be supportive. What do you want me to say?”

“How about ‘stay?’ Or ‘don’t go.’ Hell, I’ll even settle for ‘I’ll miss you.’”

She rips away from my arms and stares at me with daggers. “Does your ego need a quick stroke?” Her tone cools. “Fine—the idea of you leaving fucking kills me. I finally let myself fall for someone, and it’s the same bullshit all over again.” Her eyes start to water, but she doesn’t blink. “But I can’t ask you to stay here for me, because what if you give up everything you’ve ever wanted and realize I wasn’t worth the trade? What if you—”

“Shh.” I place my palm against her chest and feel her rapidly beating heart. “I love you. Come here.” Using her shoulder, I spin her back around. Giving in, she resumes her position, leaning against my chest.

“I know.”

I stroke her thick curly hair, reminding myself how much I’m going to miss how it feels to have my girl laid up against me. This is what I’d be leaving behind. *For a once in a lifetime opportunity.*

Reaching for her phone, Reese plays a familiar song. Ginuwine’s “Differences” fills the quiet night. “If we really want to recreate our first *not a real* date.”

I chuckle into her hair. “You sing this time.”

“What?”

“Yeah, come on, everyone tells me what an amazing voice you have. How come you never sing for me?”

“You’ve heard me sing,” she protests as she repositions herself and snuggles deeper against my chest.

“No, I’ve walked in on you in the shower a couple of times while you were humming. I’ve never heard you actually sing.”



Reaching over her I grab her phone and restart the song. “Sing for me—for real.”

“This song?”

“It’s our song,” I say.

Spinning in my lap, she rises to her knees on top of the hard concrete. “Every song is *our* song, Miles. Every time someone sings about love and making love—it’s about us. Or that’s how I feel anyway.” Without further protest, she restarts the song one more time and opens her mouth.

It takes a few lines of her singing before I can’t help but interrupt her.

“*Holy shit.*”

She scowls at me. “Um, excuse me, sir, you’re interrupting the concert. I may need to ask you to leave.” I pretend to zip my lips and she hits the chorus like a goddamn angel descended from heaven. I need to invent a new word for what Reese is doing. It’s *more* than singing. Her voice dances across octaves, switching from the cleanest melody to a sultry falsetto, effortlessly. She shows off the rich beauty of her voice and gives new life to this song.

I can’t help thinking our roles should be reversed. Someone should be offering to pay *her* to chase her dreams.

“Satisfied?”

“You were a little pitchy there,” I tease but can’t keep a straight face.

“*Wow.* Last time I sing for you, buddy.” She rises to her feet and I’m a half second behind her. I wrap her in my arms as she tries and fails to push me away. “No hugs for haters, thank you.”

I chuckle into her ear. “You have the most amazing voice I’ve ever heard. You make me embarrassed to sing.”

She scoffs. “Don’t say that.”

“I’m serious.” My hand slips from her back, lower. I cup her jean-covered ass right in the middle of the sidewalk.

“You’re incredible in every single way Reese Reyes, and I am the luckiest bastard on the planet.”

She looks up at me with a devilish smile. “Want to get luckier?”

“Uh, yeah. Always. Your place or...your place?” I’ve been spending so much time at Mac’s house, sometimes I forget my actual home is still in my cousin’s basement.

“No time,” Reese says, grabbing me by the hand and pulling me toward The Garage. “We’re alone, right?”

“Yes.”

The heavy front door is barely shut behind us before she pushes my back against the door and drops to her knees on the entry rug. She lunges for my waistband. I immediately grab her hands, clutching them tightly, even though my cock is incredibly intrigued by her eagerness.

“Really? Here?”

“What?” She pouts. “Not sexy?”

*Why am I even arguing right now? “Super sexy. Please proceed. Wait—”* I glance down at the thin weatherproof rug. “Do you want something for your knees? I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

She stifles her giggle. “Well, aren’t you sweet? But I’m okay, baby. This won’t take long.” She yanks down on the front of my sweatpants and my eager erection springs free.

“All right, cocky, let’s see. We both know I’m a marathon man and as good as I think your blowjobs are I hardly think three min—*Ah!*”

I’m halfway down her throat before I can finish my sentence. I nearly keel over from the pleasure of her warm, wet mouth. “Fuck,” I wail.

She pauses for half a second to flash me her boastful smile. “Told you.” Then she deep throats me again, toggling between swallowing my tip and gripping my pulsing shaft in her small fist. She slowly flicks away my precum with her tongue. Showing no mercy, she sucks me like it’s a competition and

my release is her prize. Holding out is impossible. I lace my fingers in her thick hair and thrust my hips forward. I expect her to choke but she doesn't flinch. I inch forward and she moans in appreciation as she somehow accommodates all of me. I swear if I wasn't in love before...this would seal the deal.

It's when she reaches under with her other hand to cup my swelling balls that I completely lose my mind. "Oh, baby... I'm—"

But it's too late.

I empty into her mouth as I tighten my fist in her hair. The entire room goes dark as I clamp my eyes closed and let her drag me over the edge. She's patient through my gasping and twitching, gently massaging my sensitive jewels like she enjoyed the task at hand.

I pull her up by her shoulders. "Did you swallow?"

She shows me her clean tongue. "That's a record, buddy. I'm pretty positive that was under two minutes." She gives me a small sarcastic curtsy after gently tucking my spent cock into my briefs and pulling my pants back up.

"Yeah, yeah, sweetheart." I grab her hand and lead her through the entry across the main floor of The Garage.

"Where are we going?"

"Backstage. I need a couch to thoroughly take care of you. We're going to need more than two minutes."

There's a little pep in her step as she follows behind me. "Am I about to get a reward?"

"Hell yes." I laugh to myself. "You've never given me head like *that* before. I can't believe you've been hoarding your super-secret magic blow jobs in the entire four months we've been dating."

She laughs. "I told you, they are a bartering tool—only for something I really want."

"That's *right*." I draw out the single syllable word. "I forgot. And what exactly is that? You earned it tenfold. Tell

me, and I'll give you anything you want."

She freezes mid-stride and her hand slips out of mine as I take another step. Spinning around, I'm worried she tripped and twisted her ankle, but there she stands, stoic. Tears begin to fill her eyes.

I know exactly what I said wrong.

"*Oh, baby.*" I wrap my arms around her and stroke her back. "I'm so sorry." She's not as okay as she was pretending to be.

"It's happening all over again." She rolls her eyes like it could prevent more tears from falling. "I'm okay...it's stupid, but I just..."

"What?" I snake my hand beneath my shirt and use it to dab at her flowing tears. Her cheeks feel hot even through the cotton of my makeshift glove. "What is it?"

"It's déjà vu. How the hell is this happening to me again?"

"What?"

"Miles, I honestly think I might love you even more than I loved Petey."

I can't lie about how good that makes me feel. The "RR" and "PM" saga has always made me think I'm a consolation prize for Reese. But hearing her say we're more...

It's all I've wanted.

She ducks her forehead, pushing it against my chest, and continues, "Which is why I think it's going to hurt so much more when you leave me."

*Shit.* "Just tell me to stay, and I'll stay for you. I'll rip up that contract, *for you.*" I tighten my arms around her, wanting there to be no space between us. But if I squeeze her any tighter, I'm going to break her.

"I can't ask that of you." She tries to hide her tears by burying her face in my chest, but she's soaking my shirt, telling me exactly how she feels.

**thirty-three**

...

On Sunday afternoon, I walk into Dad's house to find Mom in the kitchen putting away groceries. I decided to arrive early to help cook. I didn't expect the grocery extravaganza. She lights up when she sees me.

"There you are," she says, tucking her sleek, platinum-blonde hair behind her ear with both hands.

"Here I am," I parrot back. Dropping my satchel and my keys on the entryway table, I join her at the kitchen island. "Need a hand?"

"Please."

Every inch of the island countertop and half of the dining room table is covered in brown plastic grocery bags. I begin to unpack them one by one to reveal boxes of sugary cereal, energy drinks, chips, and mini powdered donuts. "Mom, what kind of groceries are these?" I snort. "I haven't seen you buy crap like this since late nights in law school." Sugar is my mom's study companion. Twizzlers are her absolute favorite. When she was really stressed about a paper, she'd ruminate while gnawing on the chewy candy like a dog tackles a rawhide—it was not attractive.

"These are *requests* from your dad and all your friends." She pulls another box of Trix cereal from the bag she's unpacking. "You should be concerned that your boyfriend thinks this counts as a serving of fruit."

My shoulders bounce as I laugh. Miles eats much healthier than I do, but he too has a weakness for sugar during long

nights in the studio.

“Mom, do you uh...want to learn to make kombucha together?”

She cocks her head to the side and stares at me like I have two heads. “What?”

“Miles and his mom were very close growing up. They learned to cook healthy together, garden, and make kombucha and sourdough bread. I don’t know...I just feel like they’re close because they *learned* something together. Do you want to do that with me? I know you said you wanted our relationship to be more than just lunch once a week.”

She crosses her arms and leans her hip against the counter. “I would *love* that, Reese.” She looks like she’s about to tear up, but after a quick sniffle, she composes herself. Poker face, on. “But does it have to be kombucha? Maybe we learn to paint mugs or make pizza or something?”

I laugh and nod my head enthusiastically. “Fair enough. That sounds good. How about the weekend after next?”

“Why not next weekend?”

“Um, herrlloo,” I say, “the grand opening of The Garage. Did you get your ticket by the way?”

“*Right*... Remind me why I had to pay for my ticket if I know the owner...or the owners? Is it Petey or Miles—I still don’t understand.”

“Petey owns the building, Miles and his cousin are *operating* the business...for now. And everybody had to pay. It looks better to bring in big revenue on opening night. All my friends paid, Miles’s family paid, even I paid. You’re a corporate lawyer, Mom. I think you can handle the twenty bucks.”

She holds her palms up in surrender. “I’m not complaining. Sheesh, just asking. Down girl.” She winks as she resumes unpacking plastic bags.

“Hey, since we’re on the subject—do you think you could represent me in a legal business matter?”

She immediately stills as her eyes narrow. “What’s wrong?” she asks coolly.

“Nothing,” I assure her. “It’s just The Garage.”

“What about it?”

“Petey’s giving it to me and his lawyer is preparing the paperwork. It’d be nice if I could have a lawyer on my side review it too. I don’t exactly know all the details about selling and buying a business, especially if there’s a physical property.”

The silence is deafening for a moment, but my mom breaks it with a thunderous roar. “*What?!*”

“We’re in a good place, Mom. Petey and I are actually friends now—”

“That’s not my main concern, Reese. We’ll come back to that.” Mom’s entire demeanor changes. Her relaxed pose goes rigid, and she suddenly looks three inches taller. Her chest puffs and her lips press together in a firm line. This is exactly how she looks in a courtroom. “What the hell are you going to do with The Garage?”

“Um, run it? Miles and I have already been working on acts to fill the venue. We’ve got a lot of interest. We’ve pretty much booked every weekend through the end of October. It’s not just music, we’re taking comedy acts, club reservations, everything. It’s going to be a good place for the community to come together. It’s going to be a win-win, for everyone.”

“Do you have *any* idea the amount of responsibility it is to run a business like that? In this economy, you’ll be lucky if you break even.”

“Petey is gifting me the building.”

She grips the island counter ledge so hard her knuckles turn white. “So? That’s barely scratching the surface. You won’t have rent, but what about insurance, licensing, electricity, emergency funds for maintenance, and a catch fund for legalities? You know businesses like this can be sued for all kinds of things, right? That’s not to mention marketing and advertisement, and—”



“*Mom,*” I say with a hiss. “Stop. Forget it. Forget I mentioned it.”

“No, no I won’t forget it.” Her tone goes shrill. “I’ve been holding my tongue for the past few weeks, but enough is enough. I’m trying to be supportive,” she says, gesturing around to the sea of unpacked groceries. “I want us to be closer so I’m tolerating this downward spiral, but I feel like you’re right back in your teenage years. Do you remember who mopped up your mess when Atlanta chewed you up and spit you out? Hm? Do you think that was fun for me to see you so depressed that you were *physically* unwell? And now, I’m watching you make the exact same mistakes you made when you were eighteen years old with a new guy. What is wrong with you?”

I open my mouth but I can’t get a word in edgewise. When Mom gets going, there’s no stopping her.

She takes a deep breath and continues her verbal lashing. “I can’t sit here and watch you throw everything you’ve worked so hard for away. And I *know* you’ve been trying to weasel your way out of Henley & Associates. Henley called me! I told him you were having a difficult time at home and weren’t in your right mind. I told him you were going to rescind your resignation, and he should completely ignore your momentary lapse of good judgment.”

“*You did what?* You don’t speak for me. *How dare you—*”

“How dare *you*? How do you think that makes *me* look? I got you that job. I called in a favor with Henley. Reese, it’s time...”

I watch her chest rise and fall, her angry breath ragged. “For what?”

“*To grow the fuck up.*” She’s not yelling, but her words feel like a sucker punch to the jaw, nonetheless. “I want a daughter that I can respect. Get your head on straight. Don’t wrap your life around a man who is going to ditch you the moment something better comes along.” I raise my brows at her.

“Oh yeah, your dad told me about Miles’s big contract. Are you going to run off with him too, this time to L.A.? Are you going to come home in two years in shambles again?”

I narrow my eyes to slits. “Miles is not Petey.”

“No—it’s far worse. He’s making promises he can’t keep, Reese. He’s not going to take care of you. Do you know what happens when someone cashes a two-million-dollar check? Their true colors come out. Do you remember the decisions Petey made? But at least he was eighteen. Miles is grown, and he should understand that being a dancing stage monkey is not a stable career.”

“You know, Mom, Petey did just fine for himself,” I snarl. Not even my mom can deny his success. He outearns her fifty times over.

“Yeah, and funny how after everything you did for him, and *gave up* for him, he’s swimming in the dough, while you’re slumming it as a minimum wage paralegal at a law firm—a job your mom got you.”

*It’s a fucking low blow.* She’s going for the jugular and as if she cut my windpipes, I can’t even speak. I’m frozen. I just have to stand here and take it.

“And make no mistake, Miles will do the same when his time comes. This is your pattern, Reese. You let these men use you. You give them everything and then wonder at the end of the day why you have nothing when they choose their dreams over being with you. This is what the music industry is. Why spend your life hurting, worried, and left behind? Stand on your own two feet for once. Choose yourself—your life, your career. Retake your LSATs, it’s not too late.”

I can’t believe this. She’s so wrong. About me. About Miles. About how much I’ve grown up. I am learning to stand on my own two feet, and I’m so sick of her trying to knock me right back down.

“Fuck you.”

The words are out before I can collect them. Her jaw drops like she’s surprised, but her entire speech was a giant *fuck you*.

I just finally had the nerve to say it back.

“You want a daughter you can respect?” I ask, seething. “Go find one. Because as of this moment, you’re daughterless.”

I grab my keys and sling my satchel around my shoulder.

“Reese.” She says my name and it comes out like a hiss. “Where are you going? Don’t walk away from me. I know it’s hard to hear the truth. But someone has to tell you to grow up. I only want what’s best for you.”

I spin around in place and meet her bugged-out stare. Even if Mom feels like she’s crossed a line, she won’t back down. It’s her nature. Fight until the end. And we are...in fact...at the end. “Five years ago, I lied to you. I scored so high on my LSATs that your *beloved* Stanford Law offered me early admission.”

“What?” She looks unnerved for the first time in this conversation like I finally found her Achilles heel.

“Oh yeah, there’s a lot you can do with a 174. They even offered financial assistance.” I feel the acid bubbling in my throat. The same acid I’ve been swallowing down for five years out of guilt and shame, because my own mother would never let me forget my mistakes. Simple mistakes. The mistakes you make when you’re a young girl in love for the first time.

She may not forgive me for how far I fell after Petey, but I finally do...

“If that’s true, you are *so* foolish for passing up an opportunity like that.” She beats her fist against her forehead and groans in frustration. “*So foolish*. If I would’ve known—”

“I know. You would’ve bullied me into going, which is why I kept it from you. And *thank God*. I’ve made a lot of dumb choices, but that one I stand by because the last thing I want is to turn out like you.”

She sucks in a breath as her mouth falls open again.

“One day when I have a daughter, I’ll encourage her to live a life that makes her happy. I won’t help mend her broken heart just to expect praise and repayment. I’ll love her *exactly* the way she is—no matter how different we may be.”

And for the first time I think in history, I’ve shut my mother up.

It feels odd, to have the last word.

Slamming the door behind me, I sprint down the driveway to my car. I hold back the tears as the engine roars to life and my Bluetooth finally connects. I try to compose myself as I dial, but the moment I hear his voice the dam breaks loose.

“Will you meet me?” I ask between huffy breaths.

“Reese, what’s wrong?” he asks.

“At our old spot. Remember? Will you meet me there, right now?”

He takes a beat, and I hear his footsteps in the background. “I’m on my way. Are you with Miles?”

“No,” I say. “I need to talk to you, alone, Petey.”

---

It’s like I opened a time capsule that just happened to be a wormhole. I dove right in and here we are—almost ten years ago, the exact same scene. Me, sitting on the curb behind the Quikee Fuel gas station, a jumbo slushy in my hand, waiting for Petey to show up.

Provided, the car he’s pulling up in this time is a luxury sports car and not his beat-up Oldsmobile, but still—the sentiment remains. Once upon a time, we were just kids, enjoying the simple things.

Petey throws his car in park and swaggers over to me. Wordlessly, he takes a seat next to me on the filthy sidewalk even though his sweatpants are a pristine beige color.

“I still love that cologne,” I mumble as the savory scent of spice and leather surrounds us.

He smooths his hands over his braids and mutters something I can't make out under his breath. Sensing the tension between us, I hand him my slushy.

“Damn, you put a dent in this.”

I show him my tongue. “What color?”

“A weird purple-brown.”

“Figures,” I say with a light chuckle. “I mixed every flavor they sell in there. Except for Dr. Pepper.” *Because Dr. Pepper pairs with absolutely nothing.*

“I can't believe you still drink these,” Petey says, taking the jumbo-sized Styrofoam cup in my hand. He takes a timid sip, then makes a face and sets it down.

“I don't. I was just thinking about how many times you told me—*right here*—that you loved me. How many times you promised we were forever. And I...” I suck in a lung full of air. “I really believed you.”

Like he's blowing out the breath I'm holding, Petey lets out an exasperated sigh. “I take it you didn't call me here to tell me you want to give us another go.”

I watch him from the corner of my eye. “Is that what you thought?”

“I hoped.”

I shake my head and fix my eyes on the filthy green dumpsters. “Petey, you have my forgiveness—”

“But he has your heart.”

Meeting his gaze, I nod and I see the sadness in his light eyes. I used to dream about this moment—the day I got to break Petey's heart right back, but there's nothing that feels good about this. Why should hearts have to break? Why is the ache and agony necessary? How come we can't just get it right on the first try?

Petey hooks his finger under my chin and turns my head toward his. My heart races out of control as his eyes fixate on my lips. *Please don't kiss me. Don't give me a reason to hate you—for Miles to hate you.* “Everything I’ve done since I got back has been to get your attention. Leaving my label, buying The Garage, making things right with Mac, being your friend...and even helping Miles. And if that’s still not enough to win your heart back, then I know you’re really gone.” His lips briefly land on my forehead, then he pulls away.

“Was it worth it?”

“Was what worth it?”

“Everything you’ve done for us. Do you regret it because I love Miles?”

Petey scoffs. “Hell no. I think I earned your friendship back, and that’s a different kind of love, but still love. I’m grateful.”

And there he is. The old Petey, maybe the *real* Petey, has made a comeback.

“Where’d you go?” I release a noise somewhere between a laugh and a cry. “Why couldn’t you have been *this* guy? Why couldn’t you have treated me this well when we were together? Why wasn’t I enough for you back then?”

Petey shifts, his knee knocking against mine as he turns to face me head-on. “Enough for me?” His brows cinch in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“You were the perfect boyfriend until you got a taste of fame. I wondered for so long why I wasn’t enough to keep your attention. I was loyal and patient, and I kept things drama-free. I spent years thinking that I wasn’t pretty enough, or smart enough, or wild enough to keep the spark going for us. But somehow you stopped seeing me, you stopped caring, and I’m always going to wonder what fell short in your eyes.” I sniffle openly. “And I’m scared whatever fell short for you, is going to fall short for Miles too.”

He groans loudly as he throws his head back. “I think you took my behavior way too personally.”

“Excuse me?” What an odd thing for him to say.

“A man doesn’t treat a woman poorly because *she* did something wrong. I wasn’t punishing you. I was a fool and a child. *I* fucked us. *You* were everything I should’ve wanted, and you have to stop blaming yourself because I was in self-destruct mode. I’m sorry that you had to stand by and wait as I grew up.” He squeezes my shoulder. “I’m so sorry I didn’t grow up fast enough.”

“Petey...I—”

I can’t find the words. I imagine the approving nods of my best friends. I’m almost certain even they’d approve of Petey’s apology. Maybe the truth is we were always doomed to end because of timing. Maybe no matter how good it started, what we sacrificed, how we looked, how we acted...we were always meant to be a moment in each other’s life, not forever. And perhaps that doesn’t mean we failed.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I needed to hear that.”

“You’re welcome.” He rubs his hands together. “I’m always going to have you in my heart, Reese. I’d do anything for you”—he raises one brow at me—“including talk Miles out of this deal if you want me to. I can tell him about the ugly side of it.”

I shake my head furiously, my thick ponytail whipping me in the face. “*No*. Don’t do that. I want Miles to make the right decision for *him*. I don’t want to pull the puppet strings. I’m just...I don’t know...emotional. I got into a huge fight with my mom. She basically told me my only personality trait is chasing men, and I’m a doormat who keeps making the same mistakes over and over again. I mean...is she right? Am I?”

“Your mom...” Again, Petey mumbles something under his breath. “Do you know that about six months after you left me and moved back to Denver, she called me? We’d just broken up for the hundredth time and she told me if I ever came within a mile of her daughter again, she’d personally cut off my dick with a rusty knife and a big smile on her face. She told me the prison time would be well worth it.”

My face twists in surprise. *Hot damn.* “I didn’t know that. What’d you say?”

Petey snorts in laughter. “Well obviously I didn’t listen, but no lie, I was intimidated.” His eyes go wide. “I still kind of am. Your mom is *something* when she wants to be.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is a bitch.”

“I think the word I’m looking for is scared.”

“What?”

“Yeah—your mom is vicious...when she’s scared. *For you.* For your dad. She only knows how to protect her family in one way. I’m not saying it’s the *right* way. But she’s a fucking pistol because she loves you so much, Reese. And when your heart breaks, so does hers. I know her delivery sucks, but at least you have a mom that fights for you.”

My heart twists in my chest at Petey’s profound statement. “I brought you here so we could have a bash fest as I vent about what a jerk she is,” I grumble. “You weren’t supposed to make me feel bad.”

“Sorry,” he shrugs and picks up the slushy, and takes another hesitant sip before he pretends to gag. “My bad. She’s a stone-cold bitch.”

Scoffing, I roll my eyes as I snatch my drink back. “If you don’t like it, quit drinking it.”

“I never liked these. I’m sensitive to brain freeze.”

“Then why’d you go get slushies with me for years?”

“Because *you* loved them.”

*Fucking Petey.* My dark knight in shining armor, too many years, too late.

“Is she right? Is Miles going to see me as old news once he’s a superstar and Elite starts making billboards out of him?”

Groaning, he leans back on his hands, burying his palms into the rough concrete of the sidewalk. “It’s not as glamorous as all that. Elite makes you an employee. Parker fought tooth and nail to fix my contract after they made a fool out of me.



Somehow, between two records I made millions, yet my royalties weren't enough for a down payment on a used car. I know you think I hit the limelight and ditched you, but I was bought and paid for and was at their complete mercy. I barely had a say in where I was going and what music I was making. You're in so much debt to the label that the only way out is to continue pumping out hits. But the more you make...the more they want you to make. Miles is in for a rude awakening, I'll tell you that much."

I slurp until I hit the bottom of the cup. Right on cue, I feel the pressure build in my bladder. "I don't think that's what he wants."

"So, tell him not to do it."

"I can't," I whisper. "I don't want to deter him from his dreams. He'll end up hating me for it."

Petey covers his face with his large hand. He groans miserably. "What if you're his dream, Reese?"

"What?"

"What if *you're* his dream, and he doesn't know you feel the same way? There are more important things than a fat record deal and being a household name. Trust me. I have it all, and yet here I am wishing it was years ago when I had nothing except you and a dream. Making music shouldn't have meant selling my soul."

"You really feel that way?"

The corners of his lips turn down as he nods. "Yeah, I do."

"If you could go back—"

"Yes." Using his finger, he trails over my forehead and traces down the side of my cheek, before grazing my chin. "If I could go back, I would've done it differently. I would've chosen you over everything else." His eyes look desperate and pleading, like a Hail Mary of a request. "If I had treated you better, would you've stayed? Would you have kept that ring?"

I ponder his words, thinking hard before answering. Would I go back to the girl I was with Petey—before things turned

sour? There wasn't anything wrong with *that* girl. But she built a house on a sinking foundation. Fast forward a decade, and now, I'm the girl who doesn't cancel girls' night for a man. I'm a woman who makes careful choices. I chose not to lead Eli on. I chose to forgive Petey. And I chose to fall in love with Miles. I'm now the woman who believes her happiness should be independent of a relationship. I chose...

*Me.*

"No." I shake my head and collect Petey's hand. I hold it in my own for a moment before I place it gently on the concrete. I know the way he's looking at me right now would cause some speculation, but the way we're savoring this moment doesn't feel like betrayal. It feels like...closure. "I needed to grow up too."

Petey nods his head. "Then if what you have with Miles is grown love, don't let him go, Reese. Ask him what you never asked of me."

"Hmm," I mumble pensively, "and what's that?"

"To stay. To choose you too."

**thirty-four**

...

With my headphones tucked deep into my ear, I get lost in the EP that, by some miracle, I'm proud of. My lyrics, my voice, packaged by Mac's beats. It took me over five years, but I'm finally proud of something I've created. And yes, Mac's a genius, Sedi's a workhorse, Petey is an inspiration, and my girl has what I'm sure is the Midas touch—but I think I'm most proud of these songs because they're honest. They are exactly what's in my heart.

And for once, I like the sound of what's in my heart.

Even though the music is glaring in my ears, I sense the backstage door opening.

"Hey, superstar," Reese says, poking her head through the backstage door.

I linger on her wide smile from across the room. "Excuse me, miss, you're really not supposed to be back here. It's an hour before showtime. Performers only. Unless..."

"No." She rolls her eyes. I begged her to sing tonight. *Begged*. But she told me the spotlight belongs only to me. The notion is ridiculous because I'm pretty sure the only reason we were able to sell out tickets is that last minute, Petey agreed to hop on stage and perform a few songs. I'm still a nobody...but a happy nobody.

"Are you busy?"

"No. That guy from Elite will be here any minute though." I make a move to get up and greet her but she flicks her hand, indicating I should stay comfortable on the leather couch.

Slipping through the door and closing it behind her, Reese spins around showing off her concert attire. Her tiny shorts cover barely an inch below her ass, and her tight white T-shirt that shows off her slight hourglass figure reads *MiLo's Fangirl*.

“So, security will just let anyone through, huh?” Security tonight is my older brother, Junior. I’m almost certain he’s already tipsy off the open bar.

“Funny thing—I flashed security and he let me right on through.”

I narrow my eyes. “That better be a joke.” She shows me a playful toothy smile but doesn’t reassure me.

She opens the mini fridge and fishes out a pie covered with Saran Wrap. “Did you see this? Noa snuck this in here for you earlier today. It’s her chocolate coconut pie.”

“The better than sex pie?”

Reese places the pie on the small coffee table, unwraps it, then swipes a dollop of whipped cream on her finger. She takes a step toward me then changes her mind. Doubling back to the pie, she pokes her finger through to the bottom of the dish, satisfied when an entire sampling of all the layers coats her finger. Crawling onto my lap she says, “Open,” before sliding her finger against my tongue.

“Mmm.” I suck on her finger until the sweetness fades.

“Thoughts?”

“There’s no comparison.”

She cocks her head to the side. “The sex or the pie?”

“Mhmm,” I say, wrapping my hands around her hips and tucking her deeper into my lap. Pulling the headphone out of my left ear she inserts it into hers, and the music resumes. She closes her eyes and hums along.

“This song is my favorite by far.”

“You like sad songs,” I say.

“I like songs that make me feel,” she replies. “I’m so proud of you.” She nuzzles deeper into my embrace with her ear pressed against my chest. “Tonight is going to be amazing. The building is already packed.”

I scoff. “They’re here to see Petey.”

“They’re here for The Garage magic. And tonight, it’s coming from *you*.” She leans back and points to her chest. “All my friends are front row, wearing the same shirt.” Tucking her chin, she looks at the words on her chest. “I believe these say MiLo, not Petey.”

I laugh. “Have I told you how sexy you look in a shirt with my name on it?”

She shrugs. “I mean, once more couldn’t hurt.”

I find her lips and kiss her sweetly. I taste the liquor on her tongue. “Pregaming, I see...”

She clasps her hands around my cheeks and then shakes her head, her hair falling in front of her face. She waits patiently for me to tuck it aside, enjoying the way I touch her. “I just needed a little shot of confidence. I’ve been thinking...”

“Okay. About?” I’m distracted as I try to find her lips again.

She inhales. “Us. I want to talk to you about *us*. I was going to wait until tonight, after your big performance, but since this guy is on the way...”

“Finish your thought,” I demand. *Is this the breakup talk? Jesus...now?* “Tell me.”

She sucks in a deep breath. “I don’t really want to move to L.A. but if you want me to, I will.” She blows out a breath quickly like she’s bracing to pull a Band-Aid off. I press my palm against her chest and feel it thumping out of control.

*What?* Of all the things I was expecting.... “You’d do that for me?”

“Yeah. I thought about it a lot, and I don’t know if moving with you will keep us together, but I’m almost certain letting you go will tear us apart. I’m putting *us* first.”

“You said you needed time. Why the sudden change of heart?”

“I’ve done this before and got burnt, Miles. And I was proud of being the kind of girl who puts no man first. I thought I was protecting my heart...but it’s a lonely way to live. So, I’ll move with you, and maybe one day I’ll regret it. Maybe you’ll break my heart. I don’t know what’s coming for us. But I know two things for sure.” She holds up two fingers.

“And what’s that?”

She extends her pointer finger. “I love you.” Another finger joins. “A shot at happiness is worth the risk.”

*Tap, tap, tap.* An impatient smacking at the door interrupts us. “You decent?”

“Sorry. One moment!” I shout at the door then lower my voice as I look into her light chocolate eyes. “*Thank you.* Baby, I fucking love you. I’m not going to break your heart.”

Her shoulders rise in a tiny shrug and then she climbs off my lap before I can say another word. Reese opens the door right as the knocking begins again. I try to recompose myself as a man in a Polo shirt and expensive-looking jeans stands at the door. He’s carrying a briefcase and my fate.

He looks right past Reese and holds his hand up to me. She releases a sharp breath and mumbles, “Nice to meet you too.”

I rise as the man makes a beeline to me with an outstretched palm.

“Miles,” he says with far more enthusiasm than necessary. “I’m Roger. We’ve been emailing. It’s really damn good to meet you, man.”

“Hey, Roger, nice to meet you too.”

He makes himself comfortable on the couch beside me as he unpacks his briefcase.

“I’m going to give you guys some privacy,” Reese says and holds her small hand out in a stoic wave goodbye. She throws one more look over her shoulder and winks.

“Superstar,” she mouths at me. I wink right back before noticing Roger’s eyes on her ass as she exits. *Strike one.*

“Sweet girl,” he mumbles. “Your girlfriend?”

“Yes,” I say firmly.

“Is she coming with you to L.A.?”

I shrug, hardly believing my good fortune. I thought I had to choose, but in this moment, I’m getting everything I’ve ever wanted. “Apparently.” Something in Roger’s expression looks off. “Is that a problem?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Not at all, we’ll just be on tight deadlines and want to make sure you’re focused as we get your album put together. Girlfriends can be”—he rolls his eyes—“distractions. Especially if they aren’t used to the...pace...late nights...” *Strike two, man.*

“Reese can handle herself.”

He forces a fake wide smile. “Good. Glad to hear it. All right, let’s get down to business so you can get ready for your show. Everything should be in order. From our prior conversation, I don’t think you had any concerns—”

“I had some questions,” I say as he wiggles a gold pen in the air.

“Oh.” Roger’s face twists in surprise. He’s reacting like I just told him I had a particularly gruesome criminal record versus simply having a few questions. He checks his watch in a theatrical display of annoyance. “I suppose I have time for a few.”

“Are you not staying for the show?” I ask, leaning back into the leather sofa and hearing it crunch underneath me.

“I can’t. I have business in L.A. tonight, but I figured I’d squeeze this in before my flight.”

*Wow.* Charming. “Thanks for making time,” I say sarcastically. This should be the biggest moment of my life. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, so why does it feel so sleazy? I always imagined my family would be here tucked in the corner, with matching tears in their eyes. Reese should



be here—this is all because of her. It shouldn't be rushed. It should be celebrated. Why do I feel like the moment I sign, he's going to hand me an orange jumpsuit and show me to my cell?

“What are your questions?” Roger says as his bushy auburn eyebrows pull in different directions. It's like they can't decide between an eagerness to please and his obvious agitation.

“My current EP—”

“Is a mess. I know. Don't worry about it. We'll assume the rights to the masters and expand it into an album. It'll all come together, don't stress about it.” *A mess? Strike three.*

I blink at him and feel my face falling. “I'm pretty happy with it, the way it is...”

“*Oh, I'm sorry,*” Roger says holding his hands up. “I wasn't implying the songs aren't great. Believe me, Miles—you caught our attention. But we aren't sure if it's right for your brand. We actually have an artist under the label that would do wonders for those songs. And you'd get partial royalties as the songwriter.”

“Whoa, wait, wait—you want to give my songs away?”

He holds the pen out again in a demanding fashion. “We're all one big family at Elite. Our main goal is to make sure that each artist is swimming in the right lane. Our only job is to do what's best for you and your career, Miles. If you're happy, it's a win-win for all of us.”

*But...what if I'm not happy?*

“What exactly do you guys think is my lane?”

“We want to explore different angles, but your look is more digestible in pop, maybe even a crossover with country. What we're trying to test out is the male version of Taylor Swift—” He stops as he tilts his head. “Can you play guitar?” He shakes his head rapidly as he dismisses his own question. “Don't worry about it right now, we'll work guitar lessons into the budget.”

“Whoa...hey, I don’t—”

“*Miles*,” Roger says with a new inflection, “look I’m going to level with you, you’re lucky to get a deal. If it wasn’t for Petey, this wouldn’t be a conversation.”

My nostrils flare as I try to control the air flowing in and out. “What did Petey say?” As far as I know, Petey had the connections to get my demo heard. I thought my music spoke for itself.

“We don’t typically take risks on new artists. The label rarely sees a return on the investment. The only reason I can offer you this,” he says tapping the contract, “is because Petey has agreed to come back to Elite for another three-album run. He’s been a major part of the Elite family and losing him wasn’t ideal. This is a way for us to all work together again. His only demand was a deal for you too.”

It hits me like an earthquake. The shock absorbs, and then the aftershocks take over. “You guys weren’t actually interested in me—”

“No, no, man. Don’t think that way. We think you’re talented. But there are a lot of talented singers on this planet. We were willing to make room for you because...we had incentive.” Roger holds out the pen again. “When someone hands you the golden ticket, don’t ask why, just run with it. How you got here doesn’t matter—just the fact that you’re *here*. And we’re *excited*.”

A million and one thoughts zip through my mind. My debt. The fact I’m still living in Law and Sienna’s basement. The car and pretty jewelry I wanted to buy for my mom as a thank you for all she sacrificed. I wanted to look my dad in the eye and thank him as I handed him a check to pay him back for covering my ass. I’m feeling the ache and the pain of wanting this for so fucking long, and how bad it hurt when I was ignored and had to move back home.

Maybe I’ve been chasing this dream for so long, I’ve lost sight of what I’m chasing.

How many more Taylor Swifts do we need? She seems to be holding down the fort all on her own...

“Roger, I just have a few more—”

The door rips open and the last person I’d ever expect to see stands at the doorway. A neat gray suit that hugs her slim figure. Her hair is pulled back in a sleek blonde ponytail.

“Robin?”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve,” she hisses as her hand finds her hip. I shrivel in my seat until I realize she’s not talking to me. “I’ve seen some shady business practices in my day, but your label really takes the fucking cake.”

Roger gives her a disgusted look. “Who the hell are you?”

Robin nods in my direction and shoots me a quick wink. “His lawyer.”

Last I heard, Reese and her mother had a huge fight, and from what I gathered, I’m part of the problem. I’m not sure why she’s riding in here like the cavalry. “Miles, honey, don’t put one dot of ink on that contract.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask. From the fury in Robin’s eyes, it’s clear she’s offended. As if Roger has a personal vendetta against her.

Yanking a plastic chair from the round table where Noa’s pie sits, she pulls it to the other side of the coffee table. Robin takes a seat, facing Roger and me, head-on. She taps the stack of papers in front of us. “I combed through this...no...more accurately I poured over this.” She looks at me. “I’m sorry, Miles, but this is a scam if I’ve ever seen one.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You shouldn’t,” she says. “They did a very good job burying the fine print. But bottom line, they don’t want your music, they want your life. The way this is written, you could go off and breed golden retrievers and they will still take eighty-five percent of the cut. This is the most restrictive, demeaning contract I’ve ever seen”—she narrows her eyes at

Roger—“and that’s coming from someone who is legal counsel for a multinational bank conglomerate.”

“I don’t think you’re qualified—”

“Let me stop you right there. You don’t want to dive into this contract with me. I will spit so much legal jargon at you, your head will be spinning as I thoroughly explain how this contract is not only unfair, it’s borderline illegal.”

Roger looks at me then back at Robin. “We can get you different legal help at Elite. This woman is clearly—”

I drop the pen and shake my head. My entire hand shakes as I speak. “I’m sorry to waste your time.”

His eyes turn to slits as he snatches the contract up from the table and stuffs it in his briefcase. “Big mistake, Miles.” His charming, salesman demeanor instantly dissipates and he’s nothing but huffy and red-faced. “We won’t offer again. *Big mistake.*” Charging for the door, he makes sure to slam it behind him, rattling the frame.

Robin lets out a deep sigh and rises from her chair. She takes a seat next to me on the couch and pats my knee.

“Did you do that for Reese?” I ask.

“No, it was honestly a bad deal—”

“I believe you,” I say, “I mean you could’ve let me make a huge mistake. Reese told me you didn’t want us together. I figured you’d be furious when she moved—”

Robin’s bright blue eyes bulge. “She was going to move —” She stops mid-sentence and buries her face in her hands, grumbling for a moment. After a few deep breaths, she pats my knee again. “I had Reese when I was eighteen years old. Her dad had one thing on his mind—making music, partying, hooking up—he didn’t want to grow up, and not even a baby was going to change that for him.

“We were so fucking broke. My hospital bills after having Reese went to collections. I couldn’t afford formula for her, and I had creditors knocking on my door. I felt so guilty about the situation I’d brought my sweet little baby into. She didn’t

deserve it. So, I worked my ass off to make sure she never had to feel as scared and unsure as I did. Then it happened. And minus the baby, with Petey, Reese fell into everything I tried to protect her from. So, I'm sorry, Miles. I see you and I see—"

"Mac."

She nods. "He dumped me, by the way."

"What?"

Robin nods. "When he found out about the screaming match Reese and I had, Mac kicked me out. He told me after all this time..." She trails off. "Well, it's not important, but it made me see that while I killed myself to be a good mother to Reese, in a lot of ways, despite the drinking, DUIs, and all his reckless decisions...Mac was the better parent." She dabs her eyes with the back of her hand. "Whew. Okay, enough of that. I came here to save you from signing your soul away. You don't need my telenovela."

"Thank you," I say, patting her hand on top of mine, "for saving my ass."

"Miles—what he said..."

I shake my head and shrug like I'm shaking off a bad soccer game. "It's okay—"

"No, listen. If this is what you're meant to do, there are endless opportunities. When that time comes, I'll check your contracts and make sure no one takes advantage of you. But I believe if you keep your heart set, and your eyes fixed on what you want," she taps her chest above her heart, "things will always fall into place exactly how they're supposed to."

As she says it, I search my heart. I expect to find music there, but there's something more. Someone that takes up a lot more space than a dream of making it big.

"Does Reese know you're here? I can go get her."

"No, I'm going to take off. This is your guys' big night. I don't want to cause any strife." She retrieves a folded-up piece of paper from her pocket. "Will you give her this?"

Nosily, I open up the folded paper and see a print-out of a ticket for an Italian cooking class at the culinary school on Broad Street. They'll be making wood stone margherita pizza. At the bottom of the paper Robin scribbled: *Reese, I'm sorry. I still have a lot to learn too.*

"Tell her it's for Saturday night if she's willing to meet me. I'll be there."

"I will."

"Thanks." She stands. "Break a leg out there," she says with a big smile. "I'll make sure to catch the next one."

Robin leaves through the emergency exit out the back, assuming correctly that the alarm isn't set. Popping my headphones back in, I try to calm my pre-performance jitters as I get lost in the music that I wrote...my words...my girl...

From here on out, I'm going to sing exactly the way I always intended to.

From the heart.

**thirty-five**

...

The crowd is packed. The venue is dark. Miles stays true to his sexy lumberjack look tonight on stage. His dark pants and dark muscle T-shirt, covered by his buffalo plaid flannel, is almost identical to the outfit he wore the first time I met him here. All we're missing is his beanie. It was cold back then when all that was surrounding us was a hollow building, rubble, and ruin.

But there's no need for a warm hat tonight amidst the steamy summer evening.

The colored strobe lights in alternating pinks, greens, and blue light up the wide smile on my face. There's not an inch of space between the sea of bodies huddled together to see him take control of the stage.

*MiLo! MiLo! MiLo!*

The crowd chants. He uses their energy to make the entire venue come alive. They didn't even scream this loud when Petey performed his song. *This is the Miles effect*. After two encore performances, he's singing covers now as the crowd demands more and more...

I get it. That's what he does. *This man makes you want more*.

The Garage isn't the same as a sold-out stadium, but I get the feeling this crowd is even louder. All he needed was the stage. Just a little attention and now all the best people in Denver, who had the good sense to buy a ticket to tonight's show, get to see what I saw all those months ago.



This essence.

This joy.

A voice that will wake up the sleepest of hearts.

Miles strides back and forth on stage as he sings, his eyes locked on mine for most of the performance. From time to time, I point left and right to remind him to look around the crowd and make eye contact with all his new fans. But he has tunnel vision, and he's looking at me like I'm the only person in this room.

He smiles at me like I light up his world.

Like maybe...just maybe...

I make him as happy as he makes me.

**thirty-six**

...

Miles

## 6 months later

I watch Reese's breasts jiggle around in her low-cut tank top as she musters all the elbow grease she can, to wipe down the sticky bar.

She bats away a curly tendril of her hair that has snuck free of her ponytail and is currently glued to her face. She grumbles when she sees me approach. "What the fuck were they serving tonight? It's like wiping glue off of the table."

"Sedi says it's all over the DJ table too. He was so pissed someone spilled their drink near his equipment. It was the house drink tonight—that Elderberry syrup."

Reese scowls and ducks under the bar. She pulls out three bottles of dark purple, thick syrup, then dumps them into the plastic garbage under the bar. "And that drink will never be featured at The Garage again."

"Why are you wiping down the bar, anyway? Where are Maggie and Sean? Since when does the big boss get her hands dirty?" I smile as I ask because Reese pours her whole heart and soul into this place. She manages every single concert, act, performance, and one really awkward goth wedding we hosted. I mean it was cool...but the Marilyn Manson cutouts everywhere were super creepy at night. Reese played wedding planner with a big smile on her face. I never imagined that my baby would be more fulfilled running this place than in her fancy business suits, with a cushy paralegal paycheck.

"I told them to go home early and try to recover some semblance of a weekend. Sean has worked eight shifts in a row and Maggie snagged her nipple ring on something," Reese says with a grimace. "I told her to take her ass to the hospital."

I make a face. "Nipple ring, huh?"

"Yeah," Reese says with a wicked smile, "does that turn your crank?" She sets the purple-stained rag down and hops up on the bar, swiveling her legs around. She makes the come-

hither motion with her forefinger. Waiting until my hands are wrapped around her slim waist, she whispers in my ear, “I could get something pierced for you.”

“Ha. No one needs to put holes in my girlfriend.” I nip at her neck. “I love you just the way you are.” I drag my tongue from the base of her neck to her earlobe. “Even all sweaty.”

She throws her head back and laughs as she hooks her legs tightly around my waist, knocking against my ass with her heel. “I need to go home and shower. We need a good night’s rest anyway.” She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Big day, tomorrow.”

“Which reminds me, should we go through the checklist?”

She glowers at me. “When are you going to trust me when I say I’ve handled it? We’ve been running this place together for half a year, and I can tell you out of the two of us, I’m not the one who forgot to order new kegs, locked everyone out of the building—twice, *and* broke a window when facilitating an impromptu *tackle* football game *inside* with their dad and brothers.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Do you keep a list of my transgressions to use against me when you need it most?”

She blinks at me. “Of course not.” She crosses her arms. “But skimp on Valentine’s Day again next year and you’ll hear a few more.”

I hold my palms in the air and my voice goes squeaky. “We were *both* working! You were the one who had the grand idea for me to do a shirtless performance of Usher covers for single ladies’ night on Valentine’s Day—remember? You basically pimped me out to sell tickets.”

“That’s called damn good business, my sexy little money maker,” she sasses. “I’m talking about *after*.”

Okay, so after two straight hours on stage, and helping my girl with clean up, we got home to the apartment we now share and I...fell asleep.

“I was tired.”

She narrows her eyes. “Mhmm.”

“I more than made up for it the next morning.” I hold up two fingers, indicating the number of orgasms I gave her in the shower that morning.

“Meh. It wasn’t your best work.”

“Woman...let’s just go through the list.”

Reese hops off the bar and resumes breaking down the bar. She removes the plastic nozzles of the soda guns and drops them one by one into a bucket of seltzer water. Yanking out my phone, I retrieve the to-do list I made last night when my mind was racing and I couldn’t sleep.

“Did you call Petey and ask if he’s bringing the good mics?”

She glares at me.

“Baby,” I whine, “please? For my peace of mind? I’m nervous. This is my first real tour.”

Her expression softens and she blows me a kiss. Reese can’t resist vulnerability. It’s all she preached at me as we took the EP that got me a record deal—sort of—and expanded it into a full album. In homage to the record that somehow brought us together, we took Petey’s *Depth* and named my debut album *Deeper*. It’s just as much Reese’s album as mine. Mac took the reins on the first five songs, but once Reese got her footing, she took over.

Reese is still learning the mechanics of the DAW, but her real strength is in coaching singers. With her hands on my chest, she’d teach me to control my breathing in the booth. She’d push my range to hit the high notes and pull me back at the exact right moments to let my falsetto take the lead. My girl could sing circles around me every single day of the week, but her true joy is finding a way to bring out my potential. It’s the mark of a great producer.

“Petey’s bringing the mics, but he says bring your own earpiece. The stadiums are going to be very disorienting, so you want to keep as much familiarity as you can.”

I nod. “Okay.”

Petey finished a new album as quickly as I finished mine. Free from the clutches of Elite Records, it’s his best album since *Depth*. He and Mac made legendary music again. They found a way to top the charts once more—their way. Funny enough, my own idol called me and my relationship his inspiration. Which is why he invited me to open for him on his sold-out U.S. stadium tour.

“Did the merch arrive?”

Her eye starts to twitch as I continue to question all her planning. “Yes,” she says through gritted teeth. “The *Deeper* shirts, hoodies, and shorts are all with Petey’s crew. They also got the glass mason jars for kombucha—which no one is going to buy by the way—and they are quite annoyed at you for having to haul glass across the country.”

I chuckle. They told me to customize merch that means something to me...so I did. My mom and dad will be at a minimum of six shows across the U.S., meaning I’ll probably sell at least six of those cups.

“Everything here is set?”

“Yes. Law and Sienna know the ropes. All the performances are confirmed. Law even said his accountant can handle the quarterly taxes. This place will be fine without us for a couple of months.” Reese slides out from around the bar, her eyes fixed over my shoulder at the bright neon sign that reads *The Garage*. “And it’ll be waiting for us when we get back.” She wraps her arms around my waist.

“And my sound checks are scheduled? I know I’m only performing three songs but I still need a run-through. It’s the biggest stage I’ve ever been on.”

“You’re all set, baby. I made sure Petey’s team knows you need just as much time as he does.” Reaching up, she places her palms on my cheeks and tilts my head down so I’m staring into her honey-brown gems. “Miles Lorren, you were built for the big stage. Get used to the size, because one day, this’ll be *your* tour.”

*God, I love this woman. With every fiber of my being.*

“And we’re all packed?”

She rolls her eyes as I ruin our moment. “Yes.”

“Flights are confirmed?”

“Yes,” she emphasizes through an exasperated sigh.

“Did my puffy coat end up fitting in the hardtop luggage?”

“No. I ended up taking it out. You don’t need it. It’s *blistering* in Nevada.”

“It’s February.”

“It’s Vegas.”

Our tour schedule is all sorts of crazy. It’d be smarter to run coast to coast, but there’s a big tribute to hip-hop that Petey’s kicking off with his sold-out concert at Allegiant Stadium. Then, we’ll be doing two more performances at two different hotels.

“Right. So, speaking of Vegas—”

“Yes, I’d consider a strip club cheating, unless I’m there with you. Then we can talk about appropriate boundaries—like tits are fine, but everyone’s underwear needs to stay on, and hands above the waist at all times.”

I blink at her dead serious expression. “I—*what?*... Why would I—*what?*” After almost a year of knowing Reese, the stuff that comes out of her mouth still floors me.

She shrugs innocently. “What? You mentioned Vegas, I thought we were laying down ground rules.”

“How about we skip the strip club and get married instead?”

She cackles. “No.”

“Damn,” I say, pretending to be offended. “At least consider it before you turn me down.”

“You’re not serious.”



I squeeze her waist and she wriggles against me, trying to escape the tickle torture, but I don't let her go. I plant a tender kiss on her lips changing the tone between us.

“What if I was serious?” Sliding down her body, feeling every feminine curve, I drop to my knee. “What if I want to marry you? What if there's a ring in my pocket?”

She suddenly looks alarmed as she tucks her loose hair out of her face. “I—is there?”

“No,” I say, “but there could be next week if you want.”

“But...” She rubs her lips against each other. Her face is completely devoid of all her usual sass and snark. “You've barely scratched the surface. Your career is just about to take off...aren't you worried what you'll want could change? We can take our time.”

I reach for her hand and squeeze her fingers one by one. “Every single love song I write is for you. Every time I perform, I'm singing to you. After months on tour, I just want to come home to a hot bowl of ramen noodles in front of Netflix, with you in my arms. One day I want my daughter to have your crazy curly hair and your sassy mouth.”

I smile at the tears welling in her eyes. She's scrambling for words. “But...sowing...your wild oats and stuff.”

“No need. You're the only oats I want to sow.”

She snickers as she wipes her face clear of the wet streaks. “Are you sure?”

“I'm so fucking sure.”

Her cheeks bunch into perfect spheres. “Then ask me for real when you have a ring, buddy.” She pulls me back up to my feet and kisses me sweetly.

“How do you know I don't already have one?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You don't have one.”

“What if I'm just making sure you'll say yes?”

“I'll say yes,” she says with a nod.

“And you love me?”

“And I love you.”

“And you’ll put *Deeper* on your precious Usher shelf?”

“*Whoa.*” She feigns mock horror. “Let’s not push it.”

I laugh, but I’m truly a little wounded. That fucking shelf-shrine to Usher is coming down if it’s the last thing I do.

“What’s left to do tonight?” I look around our place of business. It looks mostly set for shutdown.

“A light sweep and I need to mop the bathroom floors. It’s starting to smell rank in there.”

“Go home, baby. Relax. Take a bath. I’ll close up here.”

“I love you,” she says. She takes a few paces towards the door and doubles back. “*You don’t have one,*” she says again, her forehead scrunched and her eyes wide with puzzlement.

I shrug. “Keep your schedule open. Just saying.” I wrap my hand around hers and lead her to the entrance of The Garage.

“No. No way...” She studies me, trying to see through my poker face. “Wait—seriously. Do you? Because I can’t get married without my friends. And my parents. And *your* parents. I mean...the Vegas show is *next* week.”

I give her an innocent look. “Then you better make some calls.”

Her jaw falls open as she scoffs. “He doesn’t have one,” she mumbles to herself as she finally exits.

I spin around and face the empty open floor. I collect the few plastic cups scattered on the ground while dodging a few sticky spots—the aftermath of the rock concert that wrapped up a few hours ago.

Hopping up on stage, I kick a few loose cords aside the band left behind and decide against sweeping tonight. No one’s going to die from a little dust. I find the spot where I etched my name into the wooden board in the back when I sold out my first show at The Garage, six months ago. I find

the second etched signature, then the third. By the fourth time I got to carve my name into the wood, I drew a heart, instead. With new initials. RR and ML has a much better ring to it in my opinion. I reach down to trace my finger over the heart and the small black box falls out of my sweatpants pocket. *Shit.*

I scoop it up and tuck it back into my pocket, making sure it's secure against my thigh. This ring cost me half a car—I really can't afford to lose it.

Reese will like it so much more when I propose to her on stage in Vegas, declaring in front of everyone that my heart belongs to one woman, and one woman only. I know the risks of announcing your relationships in this industry, but Reese is the secret I share with the world.

She's my muse. My motivation. My reason why all the bad days feel tolerable, and that all the good days feel like flying. Little does she know, she can call all her girls, her mom, dad, my entire family, and no one will be surprised. Their tickets to Las Vegas are already booked and ready.

Ignoring the necessary chores at The Garage, which I'm sure I'll get an earful for at home, I hop off the stage and shut off the lights. Venturing into the parking lot, I see Reese is long gone. After securing the back lock, I spin around and stare at the old building that still looks a little weathered from the outside.

I pat the faded brick and smile, thinking about how this place called me back from L.A. urgently. I had to be here at exactly the right moment, at exactly the right place. The Garage always had a plan.

*Thank you for bringing me everything.*

*Thank you for bringing me...*

Home.

# epilogue

...

Reese

## **1 year later**

Mom and I both stare at the cornucopia of small dishes in front of us.

“Um...we might be in over our heads,” I say, picking up the ramekins and smelling the strong earthy seasonings.

“You don’t say,” Mom replies.

“Why would you pick authentic Indian cuisine?”

“I don’t know,” she grumbles. “Pizza and homemade noodles went so well, I figured we were ready for something a little more complicated.”

Classes have become our thing. Mom and I take every cooking and arts and crafts class together we can get our hands on. Learning new things together has helped us keep our guard down and have some honest conversations.

It was over the pizza-making class that Mom told me she failed the bar the first time around and didn’t tell anyone. She was terrified she spent all this time and money on school and wouldn’t become a lawyer.

We were painting mugs when I told her I’ve been struggling to manage the workload at The Garage, as Miles and I work on his new album. I’ve been feeling pulled in two different directions and I’m not sure what the right path is—to take a step back at the venue or take a step back in the studio. Mom holds her tongue these days. I know she wanted to take over and give me her opinion on the matter but with impressive self-control, she simply told me that no decision is irreversible. I can try one thing and if I’m not happy, turn it right back around. She told me she’s just as proud of me as the owner of a successful business as she is of the creative side of me—the up-and-coming producer, the songwriter, and the dedicated wife.

Leaning down, Mom mumbles to me, “At the very least, we can be sure that whatever we cook is going to taste a hell of a lot better than what they do.” She points her thumb over her shoulder at Miles and Dad, who are looking wildly intimidated by all the spices and ingredients, two stations back.

It took us months to convince them to take a class with us. In hindsight, a four-dish Indian feast and a quick tutorial on making your own paneer was probably not the best introductory cooking class for them.

I snicker as I tighten the apron around my waist and make a tight bow behind my back.

“Whoa,” Mom says, immediately loosening the knot. “Not too tight. You’ll pop him right out.” She rubs my belly affectionately.

“I’m pretty sure that’s damn near impossible.” I bat her hand away and check over my shoulder as I lower my voice. “And *shush*. Miles is already starting to suspect something. He said I’m acting weird.”

“Yeah...why are you hiding your pregnancy from your husband?”

“I told you,” I say, “I’m only seven weeks. We’re knee-deep in Miles’s new album, and I don’t want to distract him. Quinn and Cody are new parents. Noa and Chase’s wedding is in a couple of weeks. Then, Addie and Joel’s big day isn’t too far behind them. Law and Sienna just had baby Margo. We’re redoing the upper decks of The Garage. There’s just way too much going on to tell anyone anything right now.”

Mom nods her head. “So basically, you’re scared shitless?”

“Pretty much.”

“Were you guys planning—”

“Nope,” I say adamantly, interrupting her. “Not even a little bit. Apparently, his damn swimmers know how to evade birth control.” Miles and I never ruled out kids, but I figured I’d be well into my thirties and certainly the last of my friend group to have a child.

“Imagine that.”

“And quit calling it him. You’re going to get all attached, and when I pop out a girl in eight months, I don’t want to see your face all sad.”

“First off,” Mom says, holding up a ramekin and taking a deep whiff, “I wouldn’t be disappointed. Second off—it’s a boy. I know it.” She glances behind us ensuring the coast is clear. Miles and Dad are in a deep conversation that I’m sure has nothing to do with cooking. They are men obsessed when they’re in the middle of a project. Mom places her hand firmly against my belly over my apron. “I always wanted to give you a sibling—a little brother.”

I furrow my brows at her. “Why didn’t you?”

“I got busy going after my career goals, and I ran out of time.”

I shoot her an earnest smile. “You and Dad are married now, why don’t you give it the good ol’ college try?”

She snorts loudly. “I’ll pass. That ship has sailed.” She picks up another little ramekin and sniffs a seasoning that must be bitter. Her eyes fly open, dramatically. “But I’m going to enjoy the hell out of my grandson.”

I touch my own belly. “I don’t care what it is as long as this baby forgives me for how bad I’m going to butcher this whole motherhood thing.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m a club owner and an R&B producer. Bedtime is three a.m., I sleep until noon, and I happen to think Red Bull and saltine crackers are a well-rounded breakfast. How do I fit a baby into that?”

“You’ll be surprised how easy it is to completely change your life—for love. And this is the best kind of love, Reese. You’ll see.” A warm smile claims her face. “I’m surprised you’re not feeling it yet. You’re not nauseous?” She looks around the table of fragrant ingredients.



Now that she mentions it... I hold out my hand and teeter my thumb and pinky. "Kinda I thi—"

"Are you feeling sick, baby?"

I nearly swallow my tongue as Miles sneaks up behind us. "No." I glare at Mom before spinning around to face my husband. "Not at all."

He holds out his apron to me and turns around so I can fasten it around his waist, then give his ass a little squeeze.

"Your parents are here," he says, tapping my nose. But Mom walks to the back of the room to find Dad and we effectively switch partners for this class.

"I realize."

"Don't grab my ass in front of your parents."

I cackle. "I'll grab your ass whenever I please. It was in our vows."

"I'm certain that was not in our vows."

I tap my temple. "Pretty sure it was."

Rolling his eyes, he scours our kitchen setup. "I'll be honest baby, I like eating Indian food, but I do not think I'll enjoy cooking it. Seems like a lot of work before dinner," he says. Looking at the list of ingredients on a laminated sheet at the edge of the table, he grumbles under his breath.

"Where do you think we'd be if you took that deal from Elite?"

"Not at this cooking class."

"I'm serious. Do you still feel good about everything? Because you're still driving your beat-to-shit Jeep, we both work twelve-hour days and come home to our little apartment. Do you regret not pursuing that contract and living out your big dreams?"

"I *am* living out my big dreams."

I scrunch my nose. "What?"

Miles's green eyes glimmer under the fluorescent overhead light above our kitchen station. He grabs my hand and runs his fingers over the bumps of my knuckle. "Music is what I love. The Garage is where I like to work. But *you* are my big dream." He taps near my belly button. "You both are."

It takes me a moment to realize I'm busted. My jaw all but hits the floor as my eyes pop open.

He lets out a satisfied laugh, loving the look on my face when I'm caught. "Don't worry, Reese." He plants a tender kiss on my forehead. "I'll act surprised when you finally tell me we're having a baby."

"I—"

I'm momentarily cut off by the instructor bursting into the classroom in a tizzy, seeing as he's a solid fifteen minutes late. "Okay," he bellows, "Sorry I'm late. Welcome to Introduction to Indian Cuisine. Is anyone familiar with the Indian spice palette?" The instructor makes a racket as he snatches his apron from a standing rack and quickly tries to compose himself in the front of the room.

"How long have you known?" I hiss under my breath.

"Since I found your pregnancy test in the trash last week," he says back in a forced whisper.

"Why were you going through our bathroom trash?"

"I wasn't. I saw it when I was taking out the bag. See? You say I don't do chores—now who looks silly." His big smile isn't just because he foiled my sneaky ploy. I think it has to do a lot more with his big dreams getting bigger. "At first I thought I misread the test, but then you stopped drinking."

Miles offered me an alcoholic drink every single night last week. It suddenly dawns on me he's been testing me.

"Clever. Are you mad I didn't tell you right away?"

He laces his fingers between mine. "I figured you had your reasons."

Squeezing his hand, I say, "I need you to pretend you don't know a little longer."

He squints his eyes as he looks down at me. “What? Why? I’m ready to celebrate.”

“The girls still don’t know. They’ll be so upset to know I told you first.”

He drops my hand as his eyes roll back into his head. “Yeah, that makes sense. My role in this is pretty minuscule.”

“Exactly.”

“Jesus,” he mumbles. His annoyance is half-baked because I know he loves my friends almost as much as I do. He never misses a Friday family night. “I wrote you an entire album, married you, got you pregnant—and I’m still second fiddle.”

I pat my belly with a sweet smile on my face. “Technically, third now.” Somehow, this seems less scary now that Miles knows. I love the look of elation on his face. It makes this big, scary step seem a little more conquerable...or survivable, maybe.

“I love you, Reese. Thank you for making all my dreams come true.”

He plants a rapid succession of kisses on my forehead and my cheeks, drawing the attention of our fellow cooking classmates. But I don’t care. I swoon, my knees go weak, and I hold on to my man to steady myself.

My once sleepy heart is alive and alert, ready to soak up the scary, wonderful, unexpected but highly anticipated next chapter of our happily ever after.

## author note

Thank you so much for reading *Sing Your Secrets*! If you liked the story, I'd really appreciate it if you'd consider leaving me a rating and/or review!

Join [my newsletter](#) or my [reader group](#) to stay up to date on release information.



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## about the author



Kay, a former HR professional (survivor), startup junkie, and former CEO of the teeniest, tiniest virtual assistant company, has been writing pretty much forever. She finally decided at age thirty to start writing the stories she loves to read and to actually share novels she poured countless hours, tears, sweat, and coffee into.

Kay writes sweet and steamy contemporary romance novels. Her favorite writing tool? Banter.



## **also by kay cove**

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Book 4 - *Sing Your Secrets*

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Book 1 - *Whistleblower* (Fall 2023)

Book 2 - *Tattletale* (TBA)

Book 3 - *TBA*

Book 4 - *TBA*

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